rey infinito - Final Arc (Translated by Vish)

Chapter 12 (XII)

1986, Brazil

The *selva* [1] whispers in a beautiful voice into the ears of those who intrude, "Get out of here." Fate changes without warning and punishes people without allegory. "Kneel, or perish," it warns. The territory of the *selva* , protected by mystery and awe, is filled with the chill of a deep, quiet night. The green canopy, the lush trees, and the ground itself have lost their original colors, invaded by darkness.

In the vast northeastern Amazon, about 1500 kilometers east of the border between Peru and Brazil, there was a settlement that fortified the original *selva* as it was. It had large farms and mines, with water towers and power generation facilities set up in the uneven terrain surrounded by bamboo and wood. Insects and birds chirped around, and the sound of water could be heard. The noise of falling waterfalls echoed among the trees. Multiple combat boots trudged through the muddy paths of the commune, surrounded by cliffs and dense *selva* , stepping on the undergrowth.

One, then two, then three lines entered from various directions. It was an external contact, an invasion into the depths of the *selva* . As an unofficial paramilitary operation, the commander and his men were dispatched from the *Guardia Civil* [2] . After twenty years of anti-guerrilla training and operations, the unit had become militaristic. They traveled all the way here by patrol boat on the acidic black river, through coconut-laden wetlands and high-altitude cloud jungles, to this hard-to-reach area.

" *Vamos, vamos, no pares!* [3] " The column dispersed quickly. Armed with rifles, automatic guns, hand grenades, tear gas, and

special flash bombs, the troops were ready for battle. Monocular and binocular night vision devices hung from their military helmets. How much was their will to fight? Overflowing. Because if they distinguished themselves here, they'd get a hefty bonus, medals, promotions, and could feed their families waiting back home. Suppressing the villains who used this settlement as a base was undeniably just in the social sense.

It contributes to the cleansing of the Amazon, and eradication is our supreme mission! Esta bien vamos [4] !

But where were these villains? There seemed to be no sign of people in the settlement, but don't underestimate the secret alarms of the *selva* itself. If there's an unwelcome presence, the birds and wildfowl will fly out of the trees, the leaves will rustle, the caimans by the river will raise their heads, and the howler monkeys' dreams will be disturbed. The natural booby traps laid out will detect the invaders of the *selva* 's sanctuary. Then the smell of the air changes. The taste on the tongue changes. The temperature changes. A mist-like, different density of spiritual energy crept towards the feet of the silently running troops.

Immediately, urgent news spread throughout the commune. Commands flew quickly and orderly. By the time about half of the intruders reached inside, the assault was no longer unexpected. Figures appeared here and there from the edges to the center of the commune. Indios, mestizos, members of the Amazonian tribes such as the Jivaro and Huambisa, and even those who seemed like Native Americans. Guardians of this borderless land, regardless of race, were in position, and the whole area of the commune had essentially become a battlefield.

How were they prepared to fight? Some were thoroughly armed, but many did not carry firearms. How could they fight unarmed? It was clear that they couldn’t just resolve this by saying, "Well, well, let's talk it out." Some lurked in the grass, waiting for the prey to fall into their trap, while others boldly stepped forward to the front line.

This wasn't the first time that force had been used from the outside. The men in battle stance each raised a voice of restraint. "Don't you guys know the rumors around town? No one, absolutely no one. This settlement is a 'No One' zone. Those who harm this territory won't return alive. You'll never see your beloved *familia* [5] , or your *padre y madre* [6] back home again. You'll become the nutrients of this *selva* ."

Thus, the clash began the moment the vanguard nearly reached the key point of the commune. In the center of the commune, glass buildings glowed brilliantly in the night. Like concentration camps in the desert, huge greenhouses lined up in rows emit ultraviolet light. Indeed, this was the origin of Amazonian cocaine. Boasting a vast production of coca leaves and of the highest quality, it was a new cocaine farm that was changing the international drug market. Around the greenhouses, there were *cabanas* [7] , gardens, workshops, meeting places, and water towers. The coca leaves cultivated here were handpicked by the farmers, crushed in the workshops, dissolved in petroleum solvents, and stirred. The drug components were leached out, mixed with dilute sulfuric acid, then neutralized with alkali, and the precipitate was collected and dried to make coca paste.

The greenhouses, vital for their livelihood, were what they were protecting. The two forces, upon encountering each other, quickly entered a state of combat. The first thing to rise was gunfire, followed by screams, roars, and shrieks. The violent cacophony pierced through a thousand tall trees and ten thousand shrubs, igniting the life force of all present and inflating to the point of exploding in the atmosphere.

Let's not dwell on the details. Rather, the intruders didn't possess the words to clearly articulate what was happening. It was incomprehensible. ***They had no idea what's happening.*** Who's falling on the muddy ground? Only the attacking troops. Despite firing their guns meticulously, and showering bullets without hesitation as part of their superior 'face' tactics, only their allies seemed to fall. As if pushed back by an ***invisible*** tank unit, some were suddenly blown away, some fell foaming at the mouth, some bore wounds all over, and some burst into flames as if *combustión espontánea* [8] occurred, making it impossible to maintain

formation.

Amidst the chaos, the settlement's defenders were emitting unintelligible cries and standing like gods in aberrant paintings. They sweat like frenzied orchestra *maestro* [9] , dancing as if playing with the spirits of birds and beasts, drunk on masato.

What on earth is happening? It's as if a rare mythological miracle has erupted all at once. No, it can't be gods or saints causing this - rather, diablos [10] or loathsome spirits of the dead, maybe.

Certainly, there were 'rumors' even before the mission. *If you see a human, be careful, it might not be just a human.*

Neither advancing nor retreating was possible. Elite troops fell one after the other to phenomena that exceeded hypnosis or illusion. Unable to step into the greenhouses or residential areas, unable to capture even a single person, and unable to execute Plan B to set fire to the entire settlement.

The men of the settlement never relaxed their offensive. They didn't let them attack. They didn't let them take . They didn't let them burn. They wouldn't allow the pilfering of coca under the guise of a strategy. Though dawn should have been near, there was no sign of daybreak in the pitch-black sky. As if possessed by something, some started firing at their allies while shouting, ' H eee yahaha-Hi !'

The only soldier who managed to escape the battle dived into the grass, crawling through the mud, trying to get away from a greenhouse emitting a suspicious purple light.

Damn it, carajo no más [11] . This place defies all common sense of the outside world; if I stay here, I'll go mad too!

The escaping soldier's face was smeared with dark blue mud. Ferns

and strangely shaped flowers that looked like thistles or squids grew in the muddy ground, from which a dark mist-like gas began to seep. Instantly filling the surroundings, it induced chills and shivers like the fog of dry ice.

Damn it, how can a tropical rainforest be this cold?

The palpitations started so loud they echoed in his ears, causing throbbing headaches with each pulse. The temperature seemed to have dropped by about five degrees, and just as he tried to get up, something landed heavily on the back of the soldier lying prone.

It was neither pursuers nor wild beasts. *It* was neither bipedal nor quadrupedal. Eight legs, maybe more. So heavy it couldn't be pushed off, it dripped something viscous on his nape. There was a rustling sound, like a lobster clacking its claws. The soldier felt a chill wrap around his spine and tried to crawl away, but in the next moment, he was flipped over with tremendous force.

Reflected in the soldier's eyes was a creature he had never seen before. That face... if it can even be called a face, was right before his eyes and nose.
“Uuuh, uuuuh, oooohaaaaaaahhhh ———”.
There's no chance of returning alive — this was the conclusion of his little remaining sanity. It would have been better not to have retreated if it meant witnessing such a thing. That face became the last thing the soldier ever saw. It was not because he was eaten. He wasn’t mauled by claws or fangs. He died in agony and madness. The confusion was equally distributed to everyone who entered there. The special forces were thoroughly defeated. They were swept away from back to front, exhausted. Looking down at a dying soldier with a hole in his abdomen—— not even understanding how it happened.
A *gringo* [12] with a bandana spoke glibly. “You guys, you can't see those invisible bastards no matter how you struggle. You have no idea what tricks we're using, why your weapons are stolen, why there's a hole in your belly, completely clueless from start to finish, right? I'd like to spill the beans, but you see, those who can’t see it lack the vocabulary. The vocabulary to understand.”

The *gringo* peering down had tattoos. A series of raised dots in a continuous pattern, unraveling from the shaved tail of his eyebrow like a snake, swirling on his cheek like a clock.
“What time is it now?” The dying soldier wondered. It was four in the morning when they stormed in, so it should be about time to look up at the sky, where the darkness of night is leaving. Yet, the surface of the sky showed not even a hint of dawn. It remained pitch black. He wished he could at least die looking up at a sunrise.
“'In movies, at times like this, they deliberately let a living witness return to warn that no one should ever come here again because of such scary events that took place. But it looks like not a single one will be able to return this time. *El Jefe* [13] tends to like such dramatic stuff.”

"Strange, it should be about time..."

"Ah, did you say something?"

In his final moments, the soldier muttered to himself. What he really wanted to see at the end was not the face of some unknown thug, not the twisted silhouette of dark trees, not even the corpses of his colleagues who had become the proof of the rumor that 'anyone who attacks will be annihilated.' What he desperately wanted to see was the refreshing dawn sky spreading beyond the canopy.

It should be morning soon.

"Ah, you want to see the morning sun, huh?" Hearing the soldier's faint voice, the *gringo* responded.

Lifting his chin and looking up at the night sky, he declared, "Then give up. Here, it's always night."

Soon, the dark curtain of his eyelids fell, closing off all sight for the soldier. In this *selva* , where they couldn’t even offer a farewell to those who died for their cause, something that couldn’t happen in

the tropical rainforests right under the equator was occurring. For years around the commune, the average temperature in the jungle never exceeded 25 degrees Celsius, and at worst, frost would form on the ground. The vegetation drastically changed too, with only shade-tolerant trees thriving in the dark environment. Flipping the natural order of the northern hemisphere, where it’s morning when it's night and night when it's morning, as if a nuclear winter had arrived, the night sky here never lifts, and the jungle is deprived of the sun's grace. That was the manifestation of *la Maravilla* [14] that enveloped this land.

Here, ***'night' never dawns .***

Chapter 13 (XIII)

The mansion Sasha Loggins found was decaying in the lower town of Salvador. Grey clouds hung low in the sky above, blocking the

sun's light and beginning to sprinkle fine droplets of rain. It had grown cool, surpassing the chill of a South American autumn. Sasha pulled down the brim of her hat and shoved both hands into the pockets of her leather overalls.

Before entering, she took another comprehensive look at the mansion. It had a large garden and a fountain, but they were untended and overrun with weeds. The main house, draped in ivy, was partially collapsed, and where it wasn't, graffiti of mice and ducks that looked like they were done by rejected Disney Studio artists stood out. Sasha reflected on her own appearance, worn like a tired laborer. An old jacket, overalls, a backpack, a baseball cap with a *rueda* [15] logo; dressed like this, she might be mistaken for a *teporocho* *[16]* looking for a sheltered place to sleep... With concern for the street's gaze, she made her way through the long-neglected, overgrown trees. That man had been in this mansion.

Not to say that the Speedwagon Foundation has investigative capabilities comparable to Mossad or MI6, but particularly in specialized areas related to supernatural phenomena, such as the 'Ripple' and ' *las Maravillas* ', they might boast quite a significant market share. In the dozen or so years since Sasha joined the investigation team, she had served as both a bodyguard and an *intelligencia* [17] . After exposing the base in San Juan de Lurigancho, Fernando Alhorn, who had fled, had been casting shadows in countless civil wars and incidents, sometimes disguising himself as a descendant of Russian exiled nobility, or pretending to be a revolutionary, inciting divisions in the national liberation army. He was a man who would seize any opportunity to exploit others, grasp their weaknesses, subjugate them, and if possible, lead them to ruin. Schemes, bloodshed, and conspiracies constantly followed his footsteps. This mansion in Salvador, Bahia, was used by Alhorn, who had masqueraded as a real estate developer, for business dealings and transactions after the original owner passed away. In recent years, Alhorn had completely cut off his tracks and seemed to have gone into hiding, not showing himself anymore. According to the results of Sasha's communications interception (COMINT) and informant acquisition operations (HUMINT), this mansion was one of his last known bases. However, that was back in the early 1980s—

"Really, he loves these old-fashioned hideouts," Sasha mused.

Even if years had passed, it was necessary to conduct an on-site investigation. Alhorn still privately owned 'the Arrow' and was using it. Through years of sample collection and research, the understanding of ' *las Maravillas* ' had significantly progressed. There were definite laws to it, and it was understood that the phenomena and conditions of manifestation varied widely. In any case, 'the Arrow' could be an exceedingly dangerous trigger. The targets chosen by Alhorn especially tended to misuse the powers given to them. Therefore, to eliminate the threat to the world, it was essential not only to capture Alhorn but also to retrieve 'the Arrow' in his possession.

That man would recklessly shoot 'the Arrow'— Sasha herself was one of the 'targets' whose life had been dramatically altered after being shot. With that man's nature, even if he had disappeared for a while, he would be plotting. Even at this moment, he might be shooting 'the Arrow' at someone. He could be using those who survived for his private army and business purposes. While she was here, it wouldn't be surprising if *las Maravillas* that could plunge the world into panic had already emerged.

"Come on... come here..."

Sasha steadied her breathing. Lowering her diaphragm, filling her lungs with air. Holding her breath. Relaxing her diaphragm, exhaling the air. Stopping halfway. Filtering out distractions, she calmed her mind's turmoil and tension, waiting for the shape of her soul to form an outline outside her body.

Come on, come here.

Then, there were calls. Not just one sound from one direction. A soundscape unfolded in all directions. On the mansion's chimney, on the statues of the dried fountain, on the beams of the chest wall.

Two, then three, then many birds landed on Sasha's shoulders. Too many to be quiet, but to the right listener, it might induce the illusion of taking a forest bath. The flock of 'birds' that appeared took turns calling out.

Chuchocho, Chiiiiyo, Chochocho, Hohoho, Hohoho.

Krurururururru, Kii, Kii, Kii, Gyu, Gyowa Waa! Gaaaaii, Gyowa!

Sasha's ability produced a *visión* *[18]* —in Guatemala, it was called a *Monstruo* [19] and in Peru, a *Fantasma* [20] , but in the Foundation, it's recommended to refer to it as an ‘Astral’ according to the common language. It hasn't quite caught on yet, though. Since they vary in shape and ability from one individual to another, it's more fitting to give them unique names. Sasha's was a flock of 'birds', and she herself had named it 'El Obsceno Pájaro de la Noche [21] ', but recently she shortened it to simply 'El Pájaro [22] ' or 'Rebaño [23] '.

They look similar to wild birds that inhabit Central and South America, like toucans, quetzals, Andean condors, hummingbirds, and macaws. But upon closer inspection, it's clear they are entirely different from real birds. Their beaks and feathers are covered in a silk-like luster, and common geometric patterns appear on their chests and throats. Some have too many flight feathers, overly dangling wattles, or more than two legs, forming a swarm so large that it's impossible to grasp the total number.

It's easier to think of them as manifestations of supernatural phenomena like Ripple or psychic powers (PSI), but they are invisible to the ordinary eye, like guardian spirits, yet they can physically interfere with living beings and objects. When Sasha's 'birds' bite into caterpillars, they tear apart, and power lines where they perch in a row actually sag. Other samples suggest that *visións* usually appear as a single entity per person, but why Sasha's appeared as a group is unknown. They have the same flight ability as normal birds, can fly one to two kilometers away from Sasha's body, and have high mobility and endurance. The troublesome part

is their omnivorous and greedy nature, leading to squabbles over food and even defecating mid-flight, dirtying Sasha's hat and shoulders with droppings. Strangely, their cries are audible to everyone, so their loud chirps and chattering often cause neighborhood troubles.

"Come on, shush! We're about to investigate a secret hideout. Each one of you, be a cool spy and sneak in quietly. The one who finds a clue gets a special treat of worm pasta, so no noise, okay?"

Despite their noisy chorus, the 'birds' work for Sasha's purposes. Pushing open the unlocked oak door, they flood into the mansion through cracked decorative windows, terrace stone cracks, and chimney outlets, splitting into several torrents. *Gaagagaaga* , *Chiiichorororo* , *Gawawa* , they shriek and scuffle, breaking through spider webs, flocking to the debris of a shattered chandelier, and intimidating a flock of bats that fly out with their screeches!

"If you find something odd, call me right away."

The interior's decay was even worse than its exterior. Debris and rubble piled up, blocking passageways, furniture overturned, walls and ceilings eaten away by ivy, creating a damp *el dorado* [24] for rats, mites, and mold. What once seemed to be a pseudo-Gothic grand mansion was now decayed and rotting, a carcass of a building.

Sasha took a flask from her backpack, filled its cup lid with mint tea, and created a detection device by sending Ripple through it. If someone was hiding, their life activities would create ripples in the water through walls or limbs. It was a simple radar and the most basic, classic use of Ripple.

"It seems deserted as I thought..."

Only the 'birds' murmuring was heard. Sasha threaded through torn tapestries, down a corridor winding like sheep intestines, and turned a corner. There was broken stained glass in the high window ahead, and frescoes using plaster and pigments on the left and right walls. A continuous theme extended over fifteen meters—burning at the stake, beheading, crucifixion, whipping, impalement—every kind of gruesome punishment vividly depicted, with scenes of lightning strikes reminiscent of El Greco's dark passion. Had the family who once lived here belonged to some heretical sect? In a painting where saints kneel and pray to the dark night sky, several lines from the *Biblia* [25] are inscribed.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness "night."

Needless to say, these are the well-known opening lines of Genesis, Chapter 1, which any devout Christian can easily recite. What's noteworthy is the addition above it, written in reddish-black paint: "*No apia luz!* [26] "

There was no light?

Was this written by a former resident of the mansion, or one of Alhorn's cronies? The words from Genesis were part of the fresco, but this last sentence was clearly added in later years.

"Why would someone go out of their way to write this? Completely denying the premise of the Bible, the very foundation of it."

If there was no light in the original world, what follows— Is this an overthought, just graffiti? But these words strangely draw one's

attention. The more intently observed, the more the blackened letters started to resemble the faded blood of a living being.

Blood writing? There was no way to know who wrote it, but if it wasn't just an expression of the dark, edgy self-awareness typical of adolescence, it gave a sense of deep-rooted tunnel vision. For some reason, since laying eyes on those words, the mansion seemed different than before. Was it really just decay due to the passage of time? Could neglect alone have caused such chaos and collapse inside? Sasha scrutinized the walls and ceilings again. It was as if large animals had rampaged through, colliding and smashing walls, furniture, chandeliers, everything—indeed, there were unmistakable traces of violent destruction.

"Maybe there was a fight here," Sasha said to the 'birds'. Even though there were no bullet holes or shell casings, the house felt as if a tornado had ripped through it. The echoes almost seemed audible.

"Maybe Alhorn used his ability here."

So far, investigations and research hadn't clarified what power Alhorn had awakened to with 'the Arrow'. His actions made it clear he could see ‘Astral’ forms, so like Fabio Ubuh and Dos Santos, he must have become a powered individual. However, in situations where he used force, he always incited his subordinates, so no one had confirmed the *visión* Alhorn produced, leaving no testimonies or traces for analysis.

That man was cunningly hiding it; Sasha understood that. Revealing what his ability was would give away an opportunity for counterattack or conquest. It was crucial to keep the veil of secrecy. For someone like Alhorn, exposing ' *la Maravilla* ' and its *visión* only happened when he was unnoticed, unrecorded, and the opponent's death was certain.

If this devastation was a trace of Alhorn's ability, she had to report it to the Foundation headquarters immediately, dispatch a chemical investigation team, and collect any minute evidence, electro-optical information, chemical substance data, and other samples. Driven by a foreboding conviction, Sasha continued the search until one of the scattered 'birds' fluttered back. It perched on her arm, seemingly eager for praise.

"Did you find something?"

She was led to a library. Here too, shelves and hearth walls had crumbled, but her birds were gathering on the floor by one corner of a bookshelf. As she kneeled down to check the scene, she found scattered dark bloodstains, half of which were spread under the bookshelf. It was as if the bookshelf had been moved after blood had been shed. The flocking birds pecked between the floor and the shelf, as if to say something was there. After trying everything she could think of, Sasha pulled out a book from a box, and with a click, the bookshelf moved. It was a typical hidden door in this kind of mansion. The bookshelves were designed to be pushed all the way to the back, and beyond the door there were stairs leading down to the basement.

"Whoa!"

Sasha choked on the foul smell drifting from the basement. She descended the stairs cautiously. She tried to find the light switch, but none of the lights were working, so the wires might have been gnawed by rats. Sasha had to use a flashlight so she and her birds could see. A completely different scene unfolded below than the upper floor.

"Looks like someone threw a tantrum here... How enraged must one be to do this?”

In the high-ceilinged basement was something resembling a power

source for machinery, with exposed ducts and conveyor belt-like equipment. The vast space was divided by iron walls, with scaffolding built along the walls. The mansion itself seemed to be a disguise to deceive prying eyes, while underground there appeared to be a factory-like establishment for manufacturing something.

What was Alhorn making here?

At a glance, it was unclear what was being produced. What was certain was that the signs of destruction were even more prominent than on the upper floor. A rolling machine-like device had a large hole, rivets were scattered, and internal steel plates were exposed. Thick ducts were bent, conveyor legs sank into collapsed cracks, and the floor had fissures as if made by a rock cutter. Perhaps this underground factory was the main battleground of a battle fueled by *“las Maravillas.”*

"Guess that was true, there *is no light* here.”

For the first time since starting the investigation, she felt a sense of suffocation. The stagnant, miasmic air underground made her chest feel heavy, and she longed for the fresh air outside.

"Gaah, Gyowawa," a bird flew over and dropped something it was holding in its beak into Sasha's palm. Of all things, it was a fragment of a human bone, seemingly a finger.

"What happened here?"

What was illuminated in the circle of her flashlight's light were multiple skeletons. Were these the factory workers? The flesh had long since rotted away, no organs remained, and even the rats and earthworms had left the complete skeletal remains untouched. There was one crouching as if hiding behind a large machine, another who had died after fleeing into an office-like room, one with

shattered ribs, and another with their neck bones severed, completely missing their skull.

Skeletons abandoned in the derelict factory—what facts could be deduced from this situation? For instance, during the operation of the factory or in the midst of business, did a conflict or friction arise, leading to victims of ' *las Maravillas* ' activated by Alhorn? Such extensive destruction, turning living people into altered skeletons, might have been the manifestation of an immense energy that Sasha and her team had never encountered before. Identifying the bodies would have to wait for scientific verification—but Sasha deepened her breathing and concentrated, trying to gather any lingering images, echoes of voices, or remnants of souls from what had happened here.

The 'birds' were crying out, wailing. Forming a flock, they fluttered around the underground bodies as if mourning them.

If it can be found, I want you to search for it. It wasn't anywhere in the mansion. Where did this person's head go?

Chapter 14 (XIV)

In a moment of light dozing, the old woman suddenly couldn't tell if she was asleep or awake.

Uh, where am I?

As one ages, such moments often occur. Her breathing, the sound of her blinking, the beating of her heart, all these rhythms seemed to synchronize with those outside her. Like two pendulum clocks eventually syncing their seconds and minutes. Awake or asleep, where she was became vague, her consciousness flickering like the light of a firefly.

Clonk , *clonk* . Sounds from outside soaked in.

Ah, that's right—my life's rhythm is synchronized with the clonk, clonk, clonk of the vibrating train.

In her unsteady state, the old woman finally remembered she was sitting in a train carriage. Shifting her position slightly, she leaned back against the seat and armrest, and slowly opened her eyelids. Now, why was she on this train?

Outside the window, she could see an endless *sierra* [27] . The grand world spread out in two to three colors, each dyed in its own hues. The sky was infinitely clear and blue. It was like a sky long lost in the past, idealized and revered in memory. The railway winding through the Andes didn't go very fast because of its serpentine tracks. Perhaps sitting in her seat for so long, her breathing became shallow, her head foggy, feeling like a tiny part of this Peruvian railway. The passing landscape receded into the background, naturally turning her thoughts to memories rather than tomorrow or the future. She felt as if she had indeed passed through the best days of her life, but like a train journey, she couldn't look back to confirm the view.

Right, I'm traveling, she thought to herself. London, Venice, St. Moritz, Los Angeles, Antigua, Lima, the Andes— Her soul, left behind by the speed of her travels, seemed to have finally caught up with her recently. As she traveled further from her homeland, the journey grew more tumultuous, but now in her twilight years, it felt as though her soul had been waiting at the destination all along. And this journey was surely nearing its final stop.

Indigenous vendors were on the train, selling mirrors, woven fabrics, and carved wooden jewelry boxes in baskets. As they repeatedly walked down the aisle, she called one over and bought a pair of jacquard knitted dolls. The pair of boy and girl dolls were the cutest souvenirs.

Pleased, the vendor's daughter asked, " *Abuela* [28] , are you alone?"

Yes, it must be strange for an abuela like me to be traveling alone in the sierra. The vendor girl said she worked in sales with her own grandmother. Perhaps that's why she seemed so concerned, even asking about where I was from and my name. My name, what should I answer? My name is—

Every time I shared my fate with someone, my family name changed.

First, it was Straizo.

Then, Joestar.

And after that, Greenberg.

My first husband, George Joestar II, was a pilot in the British Air Force. Our marriage was short. George was slaughtered by a surviving zombie who deceived the world as an air force

commander. In a fit of rage, I defeated the commander with Ripple but was witnessed and became wanted, taking refuge under the protection of the Speedwagon Foundation as a stateless person.

My second marriage was a late one, both of us over fifty. Greenberg, a Hollywood screenwriter, fell ill, underwent chemotherapy, and I cared for him at home until his passing. Time cruelly dragged on. Every night, I prepared him for bed, administered his medicine, gave painkillers and antiemetics, and kissed him. Waking up to his faint coughs and sobs, the nights with his uncertain breathing were endlessly long. He was a large and warm person, like a bathtub filled with warm water. In his last few months, he needed an oxygen inhaler and became bedridden. Being able to be by his side in his last days might have been God's arrangement for me, having lost my first husband so suddenly.

It's been over twenty years since he passed. I've aged as well. Now, I doubt I can still use Ripple as I used to. Skinny as a wire, no part of my body is not ailing. My skin, with veins the color of balsamic vinegar, has become completely soft, and when I pinch the back of my hand tightly, the wrinkled skin takes a while to return to its original form. I've developed a habit of sleeping without locking the bedroom door, fearing I might stop breathing while asleep. Many cherished times and dear faces have faded into the background. The people of the Foundation still call me Elizabeth Joestar due to our longstanding connection, but it feels a bit uncomfortable since I've had my second husband's last name for longer. So, if called by name, I prefer Lisa Lisa. For most of my nearly hundred-year journey, I have been Lisa Lisa.

The train stopped at the terminal station. As she exited the station, J. D. Hernández and others from the Foundation were waiting.

"How was your train journey, Señora?" His expression was sterner than usual.

Is he angry? Even though I had long retired as the head of the

investigation team, perhaps he's annoyed that I'm still troubling an active investigator.

"You came for me, Hernández."

"Yes, we also took a different train."

"All the way to these *sierra* ."

"You don't look well. Could it be altitude sickness?"

Hernández had brought a medical staff along. *It seems I had forced them to spend money and personnel. Traveling alone at my age in the nineties has caused those around me to worry.*

"It's nothing serious, just got a bit sentimental on the train journey."

"A *viaje sentimental* [29] at your age is indeed worrying."

"You want me to stay at home and behave?"

"Mr. Joestar himself asked us to ensure it."

"Joseph?"

"Yes, he told us not to let you exert yourself."

"What a dutiful son. I wonder when he will visit next."

My son with my first husband, Joseph, also closely collaborates with the Foundation. He's busy with his real estate business, so we can only meet a few times a year. Dinners and parties with my son and his family are the most precious things at my age, but I understand that I'm no longer part of their daily lives. That being the case, when they wish for me to retire completely, it slightly irks me.

“We could have headed over to you if you had informed us.”

“'...There are things left undone that I need to attend to.”

Even as they headed towards the car parked near the station, her knees and joints didn’t carry her body well.

I am old , Lisa Lisa thinks. *Now, even walking is difficult, and my all-white hair, thinned to the point of showing the scalp, feels like wearing a hat full of holes. It’s only natural for Joseph and Hern* á *ndez to worry; I’m no longer someone who can take on dangerous roles on the front lines. Yet, I still wish for just a little more time. Even if my end is near, there is still a bit of time left.*

Riding in the back seat of the car arranged by the Foundation, they head east across the flat *altiplano* [30] at an altitude of 3,800 meters. The cool, dry climate means no trees grow here, just a continuous expanse of bare, reddish wilderness. Sheep and llamas graze, while residents till fields of grains, barley, and legumes, building stone and brick homes, clinging to life on the earth's surface.

Watching the changing scenery outside the window, Hernández spoke up. “You've read the latest report, haven't you?”

“Yes, sorry for keeping quiet.”

Hernández’s expression darkened as she responded honestly. Lisa Lisa, unabashedly taking advantage of her seniority, confessed, “I had it mailed to me. Actually, I’ve been subscribing to it like a newspaper. Sorry about that.”

“You and your ways... Can I hear your thoughts on it?”

“On what specifically?”

“For now, the ‘Selva Cartel’ and that jungle.”

“It's a major issue. It could change the structure of the world—”

It was something hidden from the surface of history. In the isolated wilds of the *selva* , at the edge of civilization, there is a thriving territory of darkness where sunlight doesn’t reach. Dawn never arrives in a roughly five square kilometer stretch in the depths of the Amazon. The light of daybreak does not shine. There, *night never breaks* .

An impossible occurrence was taking place. According to the report, it was something akin to, yet distinct from, the 'polar night' that occurs north of 66 degrees latitude and south of 66 degrees latitude. The sky never even lightens to twilight, unrelated to Earth's rotation or orbit. It wasn't like particles floating in the atmosphere, such as volcanic ash or smoke—but something *unobserved* —'Night' continues permanently but only locally, causing environmental changes akin to a disaster. Plants unable to photosynthesize wither, animals that feed on them die, temperatures drop, and both fauna and flora change drastically. Seasons are forgotten, and even the hands of clocks are abandoned, overturning the immutable laws built by billions of years of life. Eventually, fish might drown in lakes, and birds could fall from the sky. It’s almost like a *temporal anomaly* .

In the heart of the isolated *selva* , a large-scale cocaine farm operates, run by a cartel bearing the name ‘Selva’. The coca leaves, the source of all the world's pain, madness, confusion, and decadence, are cultivated, and the coca paste is airlifted by light aircraft and refined into cocaine hydrochloride in cities of Brazil and Peru. Since the 1980s began, the Selva Cartel, owning more than twenty planes, invested in banks, acquired pharmacy chains, and completed their supply chain by obtaining all necessary chemicals. They outwitted American law enforcement and became a game-

changer in South American drug trafficking. The cartel's leader, unlike other organizations, never appears in public and keeps their identity and origins secret. With political power to monopolize sales channels, meticulous in bribing officials, they allied with extreme leftist armed groups to dominate eighty percent of Amazonian cocaine, generating an estimated annual revenue of about five billion dollars. Evil and mystery intertwine there, turning into myth and fear among the people. The cartel of the jungle where night never breaks—

“Cocaine is not their only source of income,” Hernández said. “They also sell cobalt mined locally to military organizations in other countries. Just last month, an executive of a joint venture in *Japon* *[31]* was kidnapped, and a thirty million dollar ransom was demanded. After prolonged negotiations for his release, these *Japones* *[32]* were found dead in the Amazon.”

“They do anything that makes money, resorting to all sorts of ruthless acts.”

"Three days ago, Peru's *Guardia Civil* [33] raided the commune, but not a single one returned. Days later, the team members were found hanging by ropes from the trees in the surrounding jungle, torn apart by wild animals. It's not typically a case for us to pursue."

Hearing this, Lisa Lisa felt the rising temperature and throbbing in the depths of her heart. Her vision scattered with cold flickers, and her tongue seemed to tangle, leaving her unable to speak. Hernández, with his fist clenched on his knee, gazed intently, as if asking a question.

"The 'endless night' is likely one aspect of *that phenomenon* . Search and destroy operations have been conducted before by state military police and groups of former soldiers. Like the recent operation, they ended in total failure, but a few survivors remained. According to their testimony, the Selva Cartel seems to be surrounded by dozens of bodyguards. Likely infiltrators from

guerrillas, criminals, *pollero s* [34] , and followers of Indigenismo. In combat with these bodyguards, a series of abnormal phenomena occurred as if a natural disaster had struck them all at once. As if being toyed with by *Fantasma* and *Monstruo* , they were counterattacked and forced into annihilation."

Putting the pieces together, a bigger picture emerges. Hernández is suggesting that the bodyguards of the *selva* might be possessors of ‘ *las Maravillas* ’.

Tremendous fissures split the ground, the air became flammable and ignited, one of the team members lost all his teeth, bleeding from his mouth, another was slashed all over by an invisible blade. One suffered burns over their entire skin, another had their eardrums burst by piercing tinnitus, and another died in vain trying to scoop his spilling intestines back into his belly. Corpses lay with heads deformed as if crushed, piled upon each other. Bite marks, wounds, crushing injuries, burns, and frostbites multiplied with each wailing and cry of agony, the team members were strangled by invisible hands, foaming at the mouth, wolves and jackals bit off their legs and necks, limbs were severed along dashed lines as if marked by a carpenter's chalk line. In terror and confusion, they wailed under unbearable torture, not letting their prey escape. The guardians of the alien land overlaid blood upon blood, stacking mountains of corpses, each triumphing in the depths of the endless night.

Mainly indigenous people like the Jívaro and Huambisa tribes cultivate the coca leaves on the farm, but it's said that the bodyguards comprise a diverse mix of ethnicities. A Native American known in the underworld as "Devo the Cursed" for his role as a *sicario* [35] , a foreigner whose *both hands are right hands* , and such drifters have also been confirmed to be involved. Likely, those who have acquired ‘ *las Maravillas* ’ are building an illegal *ejército secreto* *[36]* to protect the immense profits of the Selva Cartel. The persistent 'night,' the most extraordinary phenomenon, is suspected to be an environmental impact caused by the power of one of these formidable forces.

" *El Jefe* of the Selva Cartel stays secluded deep within the commune, hardly showing up in trade or negotiation settings. He resides in a dynasty built in the jungle, overseeing the cartel from above like a player looking down on a game board. Considering his nature of lurking in the shadows, weaving plots, and the fact that users of ' *las Maravillas* ' are banding together, we can sense the trace of 'the Arrow' we've been pursuing."

"That man, his name was..."

"Alhorn."

"Yes, that's right, a name I haven't heard in a long time."

"The Foundation believes that over the years, Alhorn has perfected his private military organization. The expansion of the Selva Cartel in the South American drug market coincides with the period when Alhorn evaded our tracking and went missing. It's probably no mistake."

The number of ability users bestowed with unknown powers by Alhorn's 'Arrow' reaches thirty-three, just according to the Foundation's knowledge. To quote Sasha Loggins, one of his victims, Alhorn's principle is 'shoot enough, and you'll hit'— His casual firing of the arrow has resulted in such a spike in victims. He has shot from high places at pedestrians like in the Texas Tower shooting incident, targeted entire families of people he met, shot a Catholic priest during a sermon, and even tested it on an orangutan being transported to a zoo.

There have been three encounters with Alhorn so far. Looking back, letting him escape from his hideout in San Juan de Lurigancho was a bitter regret. For years thereafter, the Foundation continued to trace the marks left by Alhorn behind conflicts, accidents, and unsolved cases. At the end of the 1970s, the second encounter happened in a São Paulo casino.

Alhorn, approaching across the card table, asked, " *Did you follow me here?* "

Hernández and Sasha failed to capture him again. According to Sasha, it was one of Alhorn's companions, not Alhorn himself, who displayed their Astral at that time. Alhorn then left the scene, which resulted in many casualties, without ever revealing his own ability. The third time followed the same pattern, and it took several more years to capture Alhorn's movements again. Even if Sasha managed to get within a distance to apprehend him, being the only one able to visually perceive the materialized *visións* of abilities, the ignorance and helplessness against ' *las Maravillas* ' remained unsolved.

"Did those two summon their *Fantasma* ?" Alhorn had asked J. D. this.

Speaking of disappearances, those two were the same. Every time Lisa Lisa thinks of them, she feels as if her body is being torn apart by invisible hands, and her soul gripped tightly. Those two are the symbols of the Foundation's mistakes and regret. Not only were their names added to the list of victims, but it was a past shame of Lisa Lisa's for not being able to stop their fate from diverging.

Octavio and Joaquín.

Inside the moving car, a heavy silence settled in. Hernández also seemed to be burning with regret for the past that could not be returned to. Although they weren't taught the Ripple, the two of them resembled her former student and son from back in the old days — half a century ago. Promising investigators embodying the binary code of 0 and 1, holding many possibilities. They didn't die even after being shot by 'the Arrow', but afterward, both disappeared without a trace. The ensuing chaos was a test of human nature. Fear tears the flesh, leaps from cracks, and gushes out with screams. Controlled by rampaging emotions, they vanished from the

Foundation's branch, from Lisa Lisa's world, never to return. Diverging at life's crossroads, they walked away to different horizons.

Sasha and Hernández spent a long time searching for them but couldn't catch up with their tracks, which seemed to veer away from human paths, circumventing cities and moving away from the real world. Lisa Lisa visited the *orfanato* [37] where they grew up, searching for their origins and backgrounds, but couldn't find any relatives or likely shelters. Octavio, left scarred, and Joaquín, definitely awakened to some power, had their lives irreparably twisted by being on the front lines against Alhorn.

Where are you now? What are you doing? Or have you let yourselves be led to a darker, deeper abyss, now observing the colors of darkness from that place?

"Has it been twelve years since then…?" Hernández sighed. "What the hell have we been doing all this time?"

"You did well. You accomplished as much as you could."

"We just accumulated investigation files. Couldn't stop the sacrifices, couldn't handle the cartel protected by immense power. Special forces are easily dismissed, and we're powerless. But knowing that ' *las Maravillas* ' are involved and just watching is…"

The car journeying through the highlands was not meant to be a briefing room. Hernández, fully aware of what the Speedwagon Foundation can and cannot do, laments their powerlessness, feeling desperate. Needless to say, the Foundation is neither a drug enforcement agency nor a secret police. They're not an airborne unit that can drop napalm bombs on jungles. Currently, they can't match a group of ability users who control *Fantasmas* and *Monstruos* . Ultimately, all they can do is watch and wait. Yet, Lisa Lisa couldn't help but hope for just a little more time. As long as there is time left,

as long as this body can move, as long as there are things to try, just a little more. Just a little.

"We won't just watch," said Lisa Lisa. "I've said it, haven't I, Hernández? Even at this age, there are things I can still do." Lisa Lisa sighed deeply, turning her gaze to the road ahead.

The wilderness in late autumn certainly shows the rise and fall. The scarcity of greenery, the endlessly murky sky pressing down, causing unease and trembling, almost like a pseudo-experience of death, cheek pressed against the frozen soil of a graveyard. Yet, there's still a place to go. A ray of light shone through the car window, revealing a view of a blue lake. Even if she often forgets where she is, she never forgets the purpose of her journey and the reason for heading there.

The people living on the lake called Lisa Lisa over. Lake Titicaca spans the territories of Peru and Bolivia, being the highest freshwater lake in the world. It has large and small islands, and man-made floating islands. Lisa Lisa and her group traveled by boat from the lakeshore pier to the Uru people living on the floating islands.

"I can’t believe you went out of your way just to come here…," Hernández said, rowing. "To such a remote place."

The day was nearing its end. At least here, the normal cycle of day and night existed. The lake water, warmed by absorbing heat during the day, covers the ground with warm vapor, making it suitable for agriculture. On the islands in the lake, potatoes and quinoa are cultivated, and cattle and pigs are raised. The twilight-colored water ripples, and the sun's light dissolves into the Bolivian mountain range in the distance.

"We could have conducted the investigation ourselves, you didn't have to come here personally."

"I didn’t just come here to increase our sample size."

Stepping off the boat onto the floating island, the soft and fluffy ground underfoot felt gentle. The Uru people's communal dwellings, totaling around a hundred in size and variety, sway and undulate slightly on the lake water.

These floating islands are made by mixing a reed-like plant called totora with soil from the lakebed to form buoyant blocks, lighter than water, and then piling more totora on top. The bottom totora gradually decomposes and flows into the lake, sinking the island, so it constantly needs replenishment. If maintained well, these islands can last up to thirty years, a surprising fact.

Hernández and others split up to talk to the colorfully dressed residents. Lisa Lisa observed their way of life. Some islands housed about five families, while others were smaller, for a single household.

Everything here is made from totora: houses, churches, guest houses, beds, boats, hats, and even used as compost for farming. It seems edible too, as children were seen gnawing on the fibrous insides of the plant, peeled like long green onions.

"If a family grows, they add more totora to expand their island. They can also detach a section and attach it to another island. If there are lazy non-workers, their totora is divided with a saw, and they’ll be exiled along with their whole family."

"Which island is he living on, the man we came to meet?"

"He's a rare case..."

"What is it, is he here or not?"

"He's chosen to live alone, separated from his family, on a single-person island."

As the night quickly falls over all the islands, a breeze from the shore gently ruffles the people's hair as they return to their homes, causing the islands to sway softly. Based on gathered information and obtaining permission from the man's family, Lisa Lisa's group lit a portable lantern and headed off to a solitary island offshore.

In the darkened depths of the lake, a lonely island stood isolated. About a kilometer in size, with no obstructions to the view, surrounded only by water – indeed, it was a form of seclusion on the lake. It was cramped, more like a wide boat than an island.

Before they could hail the shore, the occupant, sensing the ripples and light of their lantern, shouted at them to keep away. "Who's there? Don't come any closer!"

Clearly averse to contact, the voice was laden with reluctance and disgust. The boat came to a halt as it touched the edge of the island.

The one-person island was stark, with only bundles of totora for living materials and small fragments scattered like ore shavings.

" *Buenos noches* [38] ," Lisa Lisa called out. The entrance to the totora-thatched house was on the other side, so they had to turn the boat around. "Sorry to visit so late. We'd like to talk to you, if that's alright."

"I don't know you, got nothing to talk about with some old hag I don't know."

"I won't come onto the island if you don't want me to, but I'd like to talk face to face, if possible."

"Who are you, old hag? Go back, just leave!"

"Be careful with your words," Hernández intervened. "We have data. We might be able to understand what's happening to you."

"You a doctor? Did my family call you? Doctors can't fix this."

"We're not doctors," Lisa Lisa added. "And I'm not just some old woman you don't know. We've met before."

"Met? Where?"

"The first time you were shot by 'the Arrow'—"

His rejection halted at that. Only his breathing permeated the silence. Then, a man with an Inca-motif tattoo on one arm crawled out from the dark interior of the hut. Still cautious, he didn't expose his face to the lantern's light. "Right, you're from that Foundation, something or other..."

"The ones chasing those *figurín de mierda* [39] , right?"

"Yes, you're Pisco," Lisa Lisa said his name.

"Are you people who can *see them* ?"

"No, unfortunately."

"Hyahyahya, then we can't have a proper talk, can we? That lady who summoned ‘birds' last time didn’t come?"

As a matter of fact, Sasha Loggins—and also Octavio and Joaquín—were investigators who had risked their lives to save hostages twelve years ago on that day. Pisco was one of them, a survivor of Alhorn's 'Arrow'. The Foundation's report indicated that Pisco, now a young man in his twenties, had awakened to ' *la Maravilla* '. His voice, lacking in intonation, held no vitality, and he made no attempt to show how much he had grown up.

"I'm glad we could see you," Lisa Lisa expressed her genuine sentiment. "Actually, we came to ask you something, but I'm not sure where to start."

"You were in charge back then, weren't you?" Pisco seemed willing to talk. "But at your age, you're not active anymore, right? Talking to you is more tedious than chatting with my *abuela* ."

"I'm sorry, but watch how you speak."

Talking over Hernández's meticulous warning, Lisa Lisa asked, "Pisco, can you tell us frankly what it feels like when it happens? The pain, the suffering?"

"Today is particularly bad. It feels like I'm being weighed down with weights and sinking in the lake, constantly sinking, but never reaching the bottom. It's a 'curse', after all. Entangled in this damned 'curse', it feels like I'm slowly dying."

Hernández was recording every word in his mind. Needless to say, this was part of the Speedwagon Foundation's main task over the past decade or so—meeting with those awakened to ' *las Maravillas* ', and collecting firsthand information. After a while of talking at the door, and being grumbled at by Pisco that they couldn't do anything anyway, Lisa Lisa's group was finally allowed onto the floating island. Barely stepping on the grass, they approached him and realized even without touching him that Pisco's body was radiating intense heat. The reason for his reluctance to approach became

clear. The revealed figure of Pisco was akin to Job from the *Biblia* [40] or a Hindu sadhu. His arms, legs, and back were covered in bulging nodules. They overlapped on top of each other, staining his shirt with sporadic blood. They made him resemble a roughly carved figure from rock, losing the contours of a human being. These nodules seemed to be under the skin, not on the surface, with grossly enlarged tumors grotesquely deforming his body. Closer inspection revealed countless needle-like protrusions breaking through the skin, and some tumors clearly writhing underneath. The pain and suffering must be unbearable. Despite having spoken calmly, Pisco's face was sweaty, gasping breaths spilling from his tense mouth. The weight of a tumor on one cheek had deformed his facial features, with his right eye, drooping nearly to his cheekbone, tearful.

Suddenly, Pisco wet himself. Droplets scattered wildly through his shorts, like frenzied bees. "Embarrassing with guests around," he muttered, self-deprecatingly bowing his head.

" Muhyahah , heh, heh, seems there's something moving around here." Pisco pointed to his right forearm, laughing. "This thing’s a fish, isn’t it?"

"A fish?"

"Like a living fish is buried in there ."

"Under your skin?"

"Yes, there’s a fish under my skin. There's another one in my lower abdomen, wriggling and biting my bladder. That's why I can't control my piss."

"This is your ability..."

"No, I told you, it's a 'curse'." Pisco laughed hysterically, almost as if choking. The force caused the foreign object under his skin to churn and pulse, and a streak of blood trickled down from the corner of his eyebrow to his chin, a ghastly sight.

Unable to look directly, Hernández covered his mouth and lowered his gaze. Lisa Lisa peered into Pisco's bloodshot eyes. His testimony was self-destructive and disjointed, but maybe there are no words to rationally explain these phenomena according to common sense. Meeting Pisco made it clear that ' *las Maravillas* ' don't always manifest beneficially for the ability user. It can harm them, cause suffering, and even attempt to destroy them from the inside with uncontrollable energy.

"They're 'stones'," Pisco claimed. Everything inside his body was forming into stones. This was the curse of the ability he named 'Yawar Fiesta [41] '. The human body occasionally forms small solid substances in its tubes and organs: kidney stones, gallstones in the gallbladder and bile ducts, gastroliths in the stomach, sialoliths in the salivary glands, tonsilloliths in the tonsils, and pancreatoliths in the pancreas. But what about the mechanism of 'Yawar Fiesta'? Whatever came into contact with Pisco’s skin and mixed with his blood would then form under his skin as stones. The memories of his skin and blood were creating physical coagulations throughout his body.

"At first, it was needles," Pisco painfully recalled. "The needle used for this tattoo suddenly appeared under my skin years later, painfully so. Even after I secluded myself here in my hometown, if I accidentally cut my finger, that stone would be embedded under my skin. Or a fish that bit me years ago would suddenly start acting up under my thin skin. I can't control what mixes with my blood or when and where it’ll surface. It's endless trying to remove it. It looks grotesque, too. So I try not to touch anything, to avoid making any wounds. I can only live by staying away from my family or anyone else."

"So there are still some surprises left," Lisa Lisa commented. "Your

ability is unlike anything we've observed so far. What's remembered by your skin and blood forms into stones over time. And it’s not just stones or needles, but also living beings..."

"Ain’t that useless? As long as *it* exists, I can't escape this 'curse'. Muhahah, I can't live a normal life."

"'By ‘it’, you mean...," Hernández asked, "the *Fantasma* Alhorn spoke of?"

"Exactly that," Pisco nodded. "Lurking like a hyena waiting for its prey to rot, right beside me at this very moment."

Pisco described it as either looking like a seahorse with a skeleton made of lead pipes or like a breast pump with a torso and four legs. When it appears, stones of organic and inorganic materials form inside his body, causing intense pain and bodily deformities. It watches Pisco suffer with glass-like eyes, its funnel-shaped mouth twitching in mockery.

Whether it's the physical embodiment of his soul or shaped to mimic his ability, neither Lisa Lisa nor Hernández could see it, but it was certainly not of this world. Pisco loathed this 'Yawar Fiesta' as if it were the most detestable thing.

"So, unless you can exorcise 'it', there's nothing to be done. Bring someone who can perform exorcisms." Pisco, seemingly exasperated, spat out his words and then continued, "You know, I knew that you would come like this."

"Oh, how did you know?"

"Even if you can't see us, you've sensed our presence. Connected to our world. It's inevitable to meet such people eventually. We all know that.."

"...Wait a minute. Who's speaking right now?"

"El Aleph [42] is waiting for you."

Huh?

Something was off about Pisco. His pronouns shifted to *plural* , and his voice seemed to deepen to a lower pitch. The calm night lake suddenly darkened, and the lantern light flickered violently. Lisa Lisa felt the night's humidity that had clung to her skin receding.

"Is this 'El Aleph' someone you know?"

"I don't know him, but I do know. Everyone knows."

"I don't understand who this is. Pisco, where did you go?"

"I'm right here."

"Then, who was speaking...?"

Lisa Lisa brought her light closer, searching for changes in Pisco's expression. His mismatched, vacant eyes seemed dilated.

"He was taken away."

"Taken away? By whom?"

"Seems like you've got something to do with it."

Pisco, moving his lips, seemed like an empty shell.

"You've got one foot in the other world, and you possess a power that ordinary humans don't have. That's why, Señora, I've got something to do with you."

"Could it be that 'Yawar Fiesta' is speaking through you? Is that it?"

"It's me either way. Whether I'm speaking or this guy does, it's all the same."

"What do you need from me?"

"Well, about that, you're going to die soon."

"Is that a prophecy? I don't remember asking for a fortune-telling ."

"You'll die alone, unseen by anyone, in a place darker than here, suffering agonies you've never known. Your death will be so unspeakable that even your descendants would hesitate to mention it. And you will be eternally forgotten."

"A common fear for the elderly. So, you're not content with just Pisco; you enjoy inflicting fear and pain on others?"

"It's just me, I can't inflict pain on others."

"Then when you spoke in plural, were you talking about your companions?"

"El Aleph will kill you."

Lisa Lisa realized she was leaning almost over Pisco. A sharp pain ran down her back and hips, so she squatted on the totora.

"What does El Aleph mean...?"

"What happened to you?" Hernández's voice was laced with confusion.

"You heard it too, right? Pisco was..."

"Let's clarify. I've been here the whole time, but you and Pisco were silent for a while. When I was about to ask, you suddenly approached Pisco." Something or someone not present here was sending messages from elsewhere. If this wasn't senile delirium, maybe for a moment, her consciousness was invaded by ' *la Maravilla* .' Or perhaps it was the ability of 'Yawar Fiesta' or something more significant.

"Enough, you people from the Foundation can't handle this. Just go back." Exhausted, Pisco spoke with neither rage nor lament. The pain from the stones eating away at his body hadn't left. With such a condition, living a normal life was impossible. Just rotting and dissolving into the lake like the totora. This visit from the Foundation might have seemed like a flicker of hope—a second chance—but it only deepened his despair.

"Pisco, listen carefully," Lisa Lisa returned to her original purpose. "No matter the situation, one's willpower could mark a change in circumstances. 'Yawar Fiesta' is not an isolated island separated from you; it's always riding the same floating reed as you. Sasha Logins showed us that. Each power continually grows, dramatically changing how it manifests. What you need is to take control of your own power. Don't set your limits. I know young people who have overcome difficulties and grown by conquering their abilities. Conquering your own ability is the only way to reach true power."

Disciples of Ripple, brave investigators, the Joestar bloodline—all their faces appeared and vanished in the ripples of the lake. They all transcended uncontrollable powers to unleash real strength.

When Pisco was told this, he became further agitated as his face contorted in pain from his body's stones rippling violently. "How the hell am I supposed to control this?!"

"What if you could expel the stones forming inside you? If you could do that, your power would no longer be a curse. Try touching a diamond. You could become a millionaire, buy a property in Manhattan, and live on a floating island in a huge pool."

"Expel them? There's no precedent for that."

"Your power is out of control. You haven't been able to regulate the flow of energy from ' *la Maravilla* .' But originally, it's a manifestation of your soul, so it shouldn't be uncontrollable. Depending on you, this power can be either a curse or a blessing."

And I can help with that.

Lisa Lisa took Pisco's hand and deeply breathed. Even in her old age, at an altitude of 3800 meters in the *sierra* , she lived a life that could unleash her abilities when needed. Ripples formed tenfold, twentyfold, on the lake's surface. Ripple was originally a medical technique. Although it could be a lethal weapon against Pillar Men, vampires, and beings weak to sunlight, it was originally a healing power cultivated by highlanders to regulate and deepen their breath, aligning with the sun's energy to draw out true human strength.

"Oh..." Hernández sighed.

Lisa Lisa gradually adjusted the output, letting the Ripple flow into Pisco's body. It wouldn't heal everything, but by aligning his body

with the sun's wavelength, his immunity would be strengthened, and it would activate his body's vital functions to counter the stones.

"Oh... Ohhh..." The warm, soothing voice was Pisco's. The pain was easing. His blood circulation improved, bringing vitality back to his face.

"This is how far I can help. The rest is up to you."

Breathing in, breathing out. Something was being released. The sure rhythm of internal organs, the subtle pulse. Pisco's stones began to flow. "The rest is up to me... I have to do it."

"Yes, you and ‘Yawar Fiesta.'"

Lisa Lisa felt as if she was touching something profound. Synchronizing with the heartbeat etched inside Pisco. *Thump, thump, thump, thump...* But it was still unnatural, not flowing beautifully. He needed to tune it like beautiful music. He could do it. The sound's resonance changed. The lake boiled with waves. Pisco's face tensed. His soul yearning for healing was screaming. Tears welled up and spilled. Lisa Lisa stopped the Ripple but continued observing Pisco's transformation.

"It's absorbing them, it's sucking them in." ‘Yawar Fiesta,' unseen yet perceivable, was changing its form. Pisco's words evoked a *visión* . Together with his life's pulse, its function was transforming. *Thump-thump, thump-thump...*

Suddenly, Pisco's skin bulged as if pinched. The stones, needles, and live fish, which were previously warts or nodules, were expelled from his body onto the totora. Hernández gasped in awe.

"I did it..." Pisco grunted. Indeed, he had. Touching anything—mineral or living—and reproducing it outside the body was akin to a

miracle, comparable to a savior who turns flesh and blood into bread and wine. Lisa Lisa finally breathed a sigh of relief. It was like a midwife hearing a difficult birth's first cry.

A barrier once crossed can be crossed again easily. Once the body remembers, it's like jumping over a vaulting box. Lisa Lisa felt her visit was worthwhile.

"I have a request, if possible..." Before leaving the floating reed, she reiterated that collecting samples wasn't her real goal. She acknowledged that if her motives were seen as selfish, she would have no defense. But above all, this was something she could only ask the evolved Pisco to do. She assured Pisco that they could wait until after his 'Yawar Fiesta' is fully stabilized, but she wanted him to produce something for her.

"From the beginning, you had this intention..." Hernández seemed to have guessed the true purpose.

"What do you want to produce?" Pisco asked, tilting his head.

"Things from the past can be recreated, right?"

"That's why you wanted to come alone..."

"The memories of your skin and blood from your teenage years... I want to rely on those memories. ***I want the Arrow that pierced you and wrung your blood, including the organic virus within it, to be manifested through your ability.*** "

Both Pisco and Hernández were speechless at such an extraordinary request. There was only one reason why the retired Lisa Lisa would come alone to ask for such a thing.

"I-Is such a thing even ***permissible*** ?! You want to obtain the Arrow and use it on yourself!"

Lisa Lisa laughed with a wrinkled smile. Journeys are meant to be undertaken. She had unexpectedly gained a valuable experience. Being witness to Pisco's resurgence was gratifying, and she had glimpsed into the abyss of ' *la Maravilla* '. But, Lisa Lisa spoke as if instructing, "I'm a person who shouldn't need new experiences. I've lived enough, ready to hand over adventures to those arriving anew. There is far more waiting for me on the other side than those I'm involved with here."

"But that's exactly why..." Hernández interjected.

"I understand what you want to say."

"Do you know how old you are?"

"Yes. I'm almost a hundred."

"It's too dangerous. That thing isn't something to be tried at a hundred! I don't think your body can withstand the selection by the Arrow." Hernández was adamantly opposed, outright rejecting Lisa Lisa's will, nearly trembling with indignation.

"That's enough, Hernández. That's enough. It's not about melancholic resolve or heroic determination. I've been pushing risks onto the young, retreating from the front lines, leading them to fatal outcomes. You know the names, don't you? Loggins, Messina, Octavio, Joaquín, and Caesar A. Zeppeli... the list is endless. So, I've stopped retreating. I won't sacrifice anyone anymore. Even if it means balancing my life and death on a scale, I won't lament over a life that's about to end at any moment."

A voice from somewhere else had just said, ***"You're going to die***

soon" – if that were to happen in a rightful battle, it would be Lisa Lisa's wish.

"I said we won't just watch, didn't I, Hernández? Clearly, we don't have enough power to confront that jungle. But what if I could don a new ability? Perhaps it might just work. If we are to face that untrodden darkness, we must do everything possible."

"Does one reach such a state of mind after living a hundred years?"

“Well, I can’t speak for others…"

"But what if something happens to you...?"

"If I die from the Arrow, so be it. Pisco, could you do it?"

"Are you sane?" Pisco, though feeling pressured, activates ‘Yawar Fiesta.’ He said he didn't know how long it would take but would try for Lisa Lisa's sake.

If this challenge succeeds, then let's aim for it. The selva. The selva where all fates converge and whirl together, the selva where night never breaks. Regardless of what darkness lay ahead, or what end awaited.

And then... In a corner of the lake, the hoped-for miracle would come true.

Chapter 15 (XV)

The dizzyingly long journey of the aged Ripple user and the Speedwagon Foundation's South American expedition team heads towards its final destination. To the grand Amazon, into the profound darkness of an unexplored land——

The *selva* at night is dreaming. Dreaming a dream that has lasted far too long. The dreams cultivate themselves, spreading through space, rooting in the folds of time. Dreams intertwine and entangle, expanding, proliferating endlessly across boundless territories. Within sleep, dreams tire of dreaming and long for the dream of waking.

The Amazon rainforest is originally a climax community of trees, dominated by shade-tolerant species that can establish even in dark environments. However, this doesn't mean that shade-tolerant trees don't require certain climate, soil, and light conditions. Rather, they try to stretch their leaves towards gaps where sunlight pierces through, spreading their branches beyond the tall trees into the canopy. If there are obstructing trees looming overhead, they spread their rhizomes below, patiently waiting until the way up clears. In other words, shade-tolerant trees can endure for years without photosynthesis. But what if the *selva* itself never sees dawn, if no sunlight ever shines through? Sun-loving trees would wither almost immediately. Their demise clears the way above, and shade-tolerant trees seize their greatest opportunity for growth. Unfortunately, without sunny spots or dappled sunlight, they don't know where to extend their branches and leaves and end up indulging in a dormant slumber. The resilience cultivated over years of lying in wait manifests as deformities, sequentially transitioning into a bizarre *selva* like none ever observed by human knowledge. A *selva* resembling *espejismos* [43] in the sky.

Everything transformed. In this place, the logic of daylight no longer applies. Ruled by chaos, in the depths of unending darkness, they devour each other, wrangle, and crossbreed in countless causal relationships. The young sprouts that win the *selva*'s survival race long for auspicious dreams of rising to the crown of the canopy. Spiraling vines grow hooks and claws, tree sap drips and overflows, the undersides of fern leaves are laden with dream eggs, and

dispersed pollen and spores each birth tens of thousands of bizarre dreams. Petals harbor protruding stamens within, indulging in lewd dreams of mating, piercing through ripe fruits hanging high on the branches. Twisting and sprawling roots spread across every inch of the jungle floor, subjecting monkeys, birds, and insects to the torturous dreams of lashing, crucifixion, and impalement.

At the end of an unending chain of crossbreeding, colors and scents produce subspecies that are indistinguishable to the eyes and noses of living creatures. The leaf mold spreads out in a splendor that even Persian rugs would envy. A brilliant display of colors, but it is all ruined, trampled under fallen trees, haunted by the nightmare of destruction. All of these are both literal and inverted dreams—with neither beginning nor end. A multitude of dreams gives birth to a universe, converging into the 'night' within a perfectly closed system. An everlasting and relentless 'night' dreamt by a singular *selva* – a place embodying the utmost extremities, encompassing even the apocalypse of heaven and earth.

Originally, this place should have been thriving with a rich world of life. But now, it has become a horizon of dreams engulfed in darkness. Dreams always carry mysteries, push chaos to its limits, and often become dangerous for others. The delusions and desires they hold are sometimes wicked, plunging those who trespass into depths of confusion. It's better to wander than to be driven mad by its incoherence, or worse, to be consumed by the dream in utter bewilderment. After all, as it is a dream, one can never flee from it like reality; it never lets its victims escape. Perhaps this land in South America is more perilous than the slums where life is undervalued, more than conflict zones between guerrillas and the government, even more than the territories controlled by ordinary drug cartels. It’s no place for the unwary to enter –

As autumn waned, it wasn’t a group of armed special forces or a team of archaeologists and geologists on *trabajo de campo* [44] who invaded this *selva* . It was a party from a non-profit organization, clad in safari jackets and pith helmets. They ascended the Amazon River on patrol boats, setting up camps along the way, taking a week to reach the territory of the eternal night *selva* .

“It’s always night, no matter how far we go…”

It’s reminiscent of the *invierno nuclear* [45] . Humanity was supposed to have avoided the threat of environmental changes caused by the Cuban Missile Crisis, the onset of an ice age. However, if the Earth rotates and revolves, yet sunlight fails to shine, the only conclusion is that suspended particulate matter like ash and smoke must be blocking the sun's rays. The reason why it isn’t freezing cold is likely due to energy balance issues. Since night continues and solar energy isn’t received, atmospheric water vapor becomes saturated. This creates a thick layer, which acts like a lid, suppressing the release of energy out of the Earth. Alternatively, this phenomenon could be like a mass hypnosis, distorting the cognition of everyone within its influence, and its effects are extending to plant life as well. Various analyses and hypotheses were made on-site, but it was impossible to determine the cause. It's impossible to apply human intelligence to ‘ *las Maravillas* ’.

“It’s cold, of course, but what catches my eye are these deformities... Just look at this jungle.”

“Can an ecosystem change this much in just a few years?”

“This isn’t just simply 'night."

Lisa Lisa and Sasha had to pay careful attention to their health management and sleep management after entering the forest. In a world where the cycle of day and night is lost, the internal body clock goes haywire. The fundamental rhythm of life is lost. Fatigue and sleepiness, chronic lethargy, don't go away, and among those accompanying, some began to suffer from sleep disorders and circulatory problems. Volunteers from the research department and the trained modern combat unit 'Rueda Squad' were both contributing personnel. Before their departure, they adjusted the amount and timing of sleep, switching as much as possible from diurnal to nocturnal. Yet, the 'night' of this *selva* continues to reduce

human activity levels.

The Amazon, supposed to be *los pulmones de la tierra* [46] , lowers oxygen levels, making it necessary to constantly be vigilant for altitude sickness as if in the Andean *sierra* . But more than that, one can't help but feel chills. The darkness was overlapping, as if it had folds. Something like a toxic mist, invisible to the eye and undetectable by the nose, lingers. The entire *selva* region undergoes a drastic change in flora, with ferns and mosses proliferating explosively, and twisted rootstalks like tentacles blocking the path. Unseen mixed plants grow, and thin purple undergrowth thickens in the gaps of the dense soil. Anemone and squid-like plants drip sap, all embraced by the dark canopy that houses not a single star's light.

Upon ascending a steep, obstructed path, accompanying medical staff approached Lisa Lisa to measure her blood pressure and heart rate, offering an oxygen inhaler. *What a fuss!* Until the last moment, Hernández and others, who had consistently opposed entering the site, even considered developing a jungle mobility vehicle like the Popemobile. It's definitely unconventional to explore a dense jungle at her age, but looking around the world, there are many peers in their nineties and hundreds traveling to polar regions or diving deep into the sea. While grateful for the Foundation's extensive support, Lisa Lisa adamantly refused to slow the pace due to concern for her health.

"It's like you're all carrying a precious taxidermy mount to a museum," Lisa Lisa joked about herself. "But thinking this might be my last journey is unexpectedly motivating for me. Even my limbs, which are like an old pair of stockings shrinking daily, still work surprisingly well when I decide to use them."

"Until recently, even walking was a challenge for you," Sasha, assisting her, commented. "Lisa Lisa, your level of activity is unbelievable for someone in their nineties."

“It's because I’m working on my breathing, Sasha. Are you as well?”

“Yes, I'm getting used to this jungle.”

“And your birds?”

“They’re out flying. I’ll call them back now.”

Soon, one of the 'birds' sent out as scouts returns. With her birds, Sasha could extend her reconnaissance far beyond.

“ *I can see them too* ,” Lisa Lisa said. “I'm really happy to see your adorable 'birds' with my own eyes.”

What's visible and what's not—Real humans and Astrals. This had always been an issue, but now, the long-standing divide has been bridged. At the very least, this team has ‘eyes’ that ordinary troops don't. Among them are two top Ripple users who also harbor ' *las Maravillas* .' Whether this is seen as a sufficient advantage or still precarious is a matter of debate among the team.

“Those men, the cartel's bodyguards, are gathering,” Sasha reported the reconnaissance results. “Ten to fifteen people... I can't determine yet if they’re ability users, but it seems they’ve sensed our intrusion.”

“Please stick to the plan,” Hernández cautioned. “Focus on negotiation and avoid reckless combat. Even with you and Sasha together, the opposition might have numerous unknown ability users.”

“Ideally, we'll enter without bloodshed,” Lisa Lisa said.

After moving through the moonless *selva* for about an hour more, they neared the boundary of the commune indicated by the 'bird.' First, the smell caught their attention. The air became fragrant. Through the lingering mist, one, then two, then three shadows emerged from the undergrowth of the *selva* , blocking their way. Using their handheld lights, they scrutinized the team as if appraising them. Lisa Lisa and her companions were blinded by piercing beams of light. How many were gathered there?

The men exuded the bloodthirsty aura of nocturnal predators. Dressed in the blackness of the dark, they moved to capture their prey. According to the Foundation's report, the area swarmed with criminals, mercenaries, *polleros* , war veterans turned *teporochos* , *predicadors* [47] who had been preaching in the jungle for ages, and warriors from the local Jívaro tribe. People you'd rather not encounter at midnight. Their suspicious whispers were audible. Hostility and pride writhed in the night, palpable to the touch. *A new threat, another assault, what is it this time? No matter what troop it is, we'll just repel any intruder. We are the guardians of the commune's boundary. Any intruder who appears without warning will be completely annihilated by our power.*

The men who had been observing the Foundation's group began to cause a commotion, one by one. Some scorned, some sneered, and some blurted out bold statements. Brimming with more and more self-confidence, they were cautious but not fearful.

"Are you guys lost *turistas* [48] ?" a voice called out, slightly easing the tension. "Came chasing some rare butterflies? The waterfall isn't this way."

"There are women here too. And one is an old *abuela* ."

"Hey, *muchacha* [49] , how about you stay here with us?"

The men laughed crudely. Provoked, Lisa Lisa responded. "We haven’t lost our way or come to see a waterfall. We're here to see

this commune. It would be appreciated if you let us all through, not just her."

"Oh, my! Talk about ancient."

"How old are you, *abuela* ?"

“ You abandoning the old woman here?"

"We want to meet *el Jefe* ," Lisa Lisa said. "We’re acquaintances, you see. I'm somewhat embarrassed to be welcomed by so many people, but how about it? I suppose living in such a dark forest would make one's character become spiteful, but I wonder if there’s someone who can introduce us. Do you want a proper self-introduction?"

Among the men, there were some who did not join in the lowly heckling.

"Think about it. An *abuela* frail enough to enter deep into the jungle is monstrous enough in itself. Be careful, she might summon a *Fantasma* .'"

There was a certainty in what he said. " *Fantasma* "— The men's caution tightened with just that word.

Some attempted to argue, but the orders the men received seemed straightforward. "Don’t talk to anyone. Just prevent any intrusion. No matter the organization, if they don't leave, they'll just die."

The words were simple yet ferocious, like it hammered against their eardrums. The hope for a bloodless entry was dashed, and Lisa Lisa flashed a reluctant and resigned smile, like dealing with a stubborn child. Beside her, Hernández, who had quickly switched strategies,

asked Sasha, "What's the situation?"

"I can see them," Sasha answered.

Most of the jungle's guards had materialized bizarre *visións* close to them or showed a glimpse of their oddity.

"Yes," Lisa Lisa nodded. " *I can see them too.* "

Fantasmas , *Monstruos* , Curses, Astrals—the Speedwagon Foundation used these various names in English and Spanish-speaking regions. Sasha conveyed the imposing forms of these entities to Hernández.

Lisa Lisa also observed closely. "The fact that I've made it to this *selva* after passing through the 'Arrow's' selection means I've also stepped into a world where I can see them."

They definitely appeared vague like shadows or guardian spirits, each maintaining a distinct shape which densely pressed upon one's five senses.

For example, there were humanoid figures—one was jelly-like and cloaked in darkness. There was a savage with a dozen compound eyes like frog eggs. An alien covered in barnacle-like, rugged scales. An odd person wrapped in scrap metal. A soldier with bandoliers wrapped around his body. A demon with four faces, each facing a different direction at the same time.

There were mechanical figures—a floating object with an exposed brass pipe framework. A marionette wearing something that looked like a halo brace. A model of a human body overlapped with gears and gyroscopes. A heavy machine with eight legs.

There were also animal-like forms—a towering dark green snake. A giraffe-like creature armored for battle. A four-legged creature covered in moss and thorns. A reptile with crocodile-like jaws and saw-toothed fangs.

And then there were the amorphous ones—just things made of only colors and lines, entities dragging along dizzying sequences of images, or an amalgamation of unreadable characters, symbols, diagrams, and signs. Unidentified geometric objects that seemed kneaded out of dust. Or those that could not be divided into categories, where they're a seamless mixture of everything.

Hearing about something and actually seeing it with one's own eyes had a different impact. Even Lisa Lisa, who was rarely shocked or intimidated, felt her knees and ankles grow cold, her breath caught, and the feeling that she was about to have a heart attack. These were ' *visións'* brought about by ' *las Maravillas* ' - a phenomenon that was off the charts. It was as if they were the wardens of a psychedelic *infierno* [50] . Any ordinary person would surely be terrified and tremble. Lisa Lisa felt like she was in a world apart. Some might describe it as the materialization of Ripple or psychic powers, but there had never been an instance where the Ripple was this bone-chilling to the eyes of an ordinary person. Among the *selva* 's guards, some were casually chatting with their own Astral forms, while others fed yucca to their Astrals like fodder to a horse, showing a variety of relationships between Astrals and their users. In this *selva* where night never dawns, all of them seemed like caricatures of solidified nightmares.

"Stand back, Lisa Lisa!" Sasha shouted.

In the blink of an eye, Hernández and the others gathered around her, forming multiple layers. One man took initiative and began the attack. A man with a pigeon chest covered in scars brandished a *serpiente [51]* with a sickle-like head. When it raised its neck, it hissed and lunged agilely, zigzagging. Following in quick succession, a man in camouflage stepped forward, leading with a humanoid *visión* made of hundreds and thousands of intertwined detonating cords. Then, a mercenary clad in an Astral like armored

plates, and a *visión* running with afterimages trailing behind it attacked as well. These forces seemed to be an effective vanguard to assess the opponent's move. The serpent's sickle-like head, shining like a machete, fiercely attacked by slashing at the legs of the Rueda Squad members. Other Astrals crushed trees with a single blow, incapacitating the soldiers. The elite trained secretly by the Foundation for this day weren't able to immediately adapt to their anticipated fight. But the battle wasn't over yet. It was Sasha who raised the signal for counterattack. Gathering her scattered "birds" in one hand, she flew them high and commanded a simultaneous attack as if she were a falconer.

Krrrrrrrrr, Gyururu, Gyuwawa! Gagagaga, Gyowawawaw!

The flock formed in the air, spiraled twice, then thrice, before plummeting down like a waterfall. The terror of being attacked by a flock of birds was palpable even to those who hadn't seen Hitchcock's film. The birds, resonating with Sasha's fighting spirit, invoked primal fear in everyone who lacked wings. For Sasha, it felt as if this was a true test of her worth. Over the past decade, she had been at the forefront of dangerous encounters with ability users, accumulating experience not just in Ripple but also as a user of *'la Maravilla'* . She had become proficient in controlling a swarm of "birds" in battle, expanding her tactical repertoire, and protecting allies while maintaining the offensive. The birds swooped and pecked at vulnerable spots with their beak tips. Eyes. Ears. Lips. Throat. Eyes. They caught the serpent's body with their claws and soared into the night sky. They attacked both the jungle's guards and their Astrals, striking with their wings, and clawing at arms, fingers, and eyes. As they rose, they gathered like clouds and formed a giant bird. The bewildered men shouted in panic.

It's a giant bird! A monster bird!

"That should be enough, take us to *el Jefe* !"

But, not a single bird escaped unscathed. Astral attacks struck down

the "birds," and the serpent's sickle pierced their bellies. Each time, Sasha spat blood, clutched her bleeding parts, and staggered. Despite being dispersed, attacks on Sasha's Astral returned to her. That was one of the basic concepts; Lisa Lisa was learning through combat. Using an Astral was a double-edged sword that also puts the user at risk. Only Astrals could damage Astrals, and humans couldn't touch them unless the Astrals made contact. Faced with the enemy's Astral, Lisa Lisa stepped forward, attempting to sever the approaching *visión* with Ripple, but it was ineffective. She felt something silently pass through her insides. An Overdrive couldn't interfere with this existence that was neither a life form nor organic. Outnumbered and facing the composed jungle's guards, most of whom were still holding back, the Rueda Squad was struggling, and it wasn't feasible to leave Sasha alone in the fray. In the midst of the chaos, Lisa Lisa quietly concentrated as her entire body trembled, trying to activate ‘ *la Maravilla* ’ of her own.

"Not yet! Leave this to me," Sasha shouted. "If there's a chance of victory for us, it's to get you to *el Jefe* unharmed. To break the cartel, retrieve 'the Arrow,' and have any hope for survival, there's no other way."

"It's too much for you alone. At this rate..."

"I'll make them realize. If we continue to fight like this, the cartel will suffer significant casualties too."

Sasha's eyes glowed red from the blood poured into them, and her bared teeth were also stained with blood. The night air heated up and the wind rustled the leaves of the shade trees. A single blitz of the sickle from the monstrous serpent knocked down a bird. Another Astral grabbed a wing and slammed it, while another spat a venom-like substance from behind, downing four, then five birds at once. Lisa Lisa couldn't stand it any longer. Shaking off her restraints, she deeply exhaled. Burying her chin in her scarf and concentrating, she felt pressure in her eardrums like taking off in an airplane, bouncing around inside her skull—projecting a red light behind her retina. Lisa Lisa altered her breathing and heartbeat rhythm, desiring to form a

humanoid *visión* with the flickering radiant light.

She wished strongly, very strongly. *I can see it. I can manifest it outside my body, and let the bodyguard boys know what it's like.*

Just then, a man ran out from the enemy camp. He was a face Lisa Lisa hadn't seen when they first confronted the men. Had he come as reinforcements, knowing there was a fight at the *selva* 's boundary? The mestizo with braided hair had a black dragon tattoo coiling around his wrist. He didn't demand surrender nor rely on an Astral. Instead, he gestured to his own side, pointing at their Astrals, and showing a pushing-back motion. He remained silent, scanning the faces of the Foundation's members.

"You are..."

His appearance had changed over the years, so it wasn't immediately clear who he was. The man who intervened to calm both sides let out a breath above his head, swirling it around, and pursed his lips, creating a crescent moon-shaped wrinkle on his left cheek. Lisa Lisa recognized the sorrow in that expression, and in those amber eyes. Sasha, too, stopped the 'birds' she was inciting. Hernández also showed surprise on his face. There stood the man who had once shared a destiny with the group. Although it was for a limited period, they were able to get through the turbulent times thanks to his contribution. He was the young man who had once wished in the back alleys of Antigua to live without fear of murder or conflict, and to be as free as the wind.

"You are Joaquín, aren't you?" Lisa Lisa called out.

His lips parted, and an indistinct voice overflowed. *O-oh oh oh oh...*

It was a voice that was neither roaring nor lamenting, a voice through which one couldn't discern any embraced emotions. It had

become more distorted than before, like the pent-up rumbling at the bottom of a valley. He had lost weight but it made him look more fierce. Under his eyes, large dark circles drew curves, seemingly dragging weariness with them. Joaquín, reminiscent of a translucent creature dwelling in deep waters, was cloaked in a dark spiritual aura.

"Meeting again after twelve years in such a jungle, huh?"

It was a reunion she had hoped for, yet she also felt a pang of wishing it had not been under these circumstances. Carrying such torn emotions, she hadn't wanted to see his face.

Lisa Lisa shook her head. "I'm grateful we could meet again while I’m still alive. But being here means..."

Joaquín closed his mouth again, falling silent.

"Joaquín, it's me," Sasha joined in the long-awaited reunion. Joaquín didn't respond, just silently stared at Sasha. "You've changed quite a bit in appearance."

Joaquín remained silent, continuing to gaze at Sasha. "So it’s true, you’ve also awakened some kind of power..."

Joaquín neither affirmed nor denied. "You left with that power. We searched so much for you, and you ended up deep in this jungle... You didn't switch sides to join Alhorn's gang, did you?"

Mentioning Alhorn stirred murmurs among the guards, but no one resumed the fight. It seemed they were leaving the situation to Joaquín, who had stepped between the two groups. Clearly a member of the Selva Cartel, Joaquín's ability to command the fierce men with just his presence suggested that he wasn’t just any ordinary member and held a high rank within.

"You know the cruel and ruthless acts that man has committed. Why are you on that side, Joaquín? Were you also dragged into the 'night's' gravity?!"

Despite the probing questions, Joaquín only silently shook his head. His closed lips held an eternal silence. Slowly, very slowly, he lifted his gaze and attempted a smile. It was neither a sneer nor a scoff. Nor was it an empty smile, too lax to be considered hollow. It was a subtle, empathetic smile, tinged with a hint of pity. But who was it pitying? Lisa Lisa and her group, or perhaps himself?

As Joaquín signaled to the other guards, he closed his eyes shut as if he was biting something with his eyelids, and stretched out his index finger as if he was finding the North Star. The dragon tattoo on his right arm began to slide up his skin towards his fingertip. No, it wasn't a tattoo. It was more like a birthmark, one that wasn't there originally. A dark-patterned mark as if stained with darkness itself—a drop of pitch-black liquid appeared at the tip of his finger. It hung from his finger like thick oil, quivered, and eventually fell. The black droplet slowly descended and burst at Joaquín's feet. The next moment, a black wave spread in all directions, further decaying the jungle floor beneath and surging towards Lisa Lisa and her group. Instinctively holding her breath, Lisa Lisa realized the black wave passed through them like invisible radiation, absorbing something and dissolving into the dense darkness of the 'night' that enveloped the entire *selva* . Her body felt drained, a chill running from head to toe, but it didn't seem to cause any immediate damage. Perhaps, this was a demonstration.

What burst from Joaquín's finger was a droplet of darkness, a crystal of lightless void. An apocalyptic black vacuum from the cosmos. It seemed like a droplet extracted from all the 'nights' he had ever lived through.

Grasping his unspoken intention, Lisa Lisa spoke out. "The unending 'night' is your power, isn’t it, Joaquín?"

It was a quiet standoff, contrary to the prior chaos. The night. It was night that his fingers had created. Lisa Lisa finally understood the true intention behind Joaquín's faint smile. Caught in the midst of an extraordinary ' *la Maravilla* ' and plunged into the depths of an eternal 'night', the situation of the group – including Joaquín himself – was so pitiable that he couldn’t help but crack a smile.

Chapter 16 (XVI)

Long time no see. It's Joaquín.

If one were to listen to his unspoken words, it might have been a simple and honest response like that. What shouldn't be forgotten is that the Speedwagon Foundation's investigative expedition across the countries of Central and South America is also the story of *those two* . But whether this is a hidden hero's tale, a bizarre fantasy, or a picaresque fable spun by crime and escape, is something that future generations will have differing opinions on.

Going back twelve years ago –

Back then, everything in sight had undeniably faded and dissolved into an intensifying darkness. A desolate, silent, godless world. Joaquín was living through time not marked on calendars—in hours uncounted by clocks. Rejected by daylight, exiled, Joaquín wandered the depths of night, pulling a cart. As a wanderer, with his spirit on the brink of peril, he closed off his senses. Seeing nothing, hearing nothing, and feeling nothing, he treaded the night's soil. He moved from cities to forests, occasionally witnessing primordial forests and deep canyons. He saw dark, writhing rivers, mines, and quarries. Amidst sleepiness that fell like a sudden downpour, he saw *espejismos* [52] so real they made him doubt reality. He understood all too well what it meant to be forsaken by the sun. It meant being cast out from human endeavors. The course of the celestial sphere becomes utterly irrelevant, and time no longer marks his body's circadian rhythm. Exhausted with his senses dulled, he was only able to sleep in broken, incomplete fragments. Wandering aimlessly like a discarded shadow, he gradually lost the foundation of being human, and it starts to feel like there might never have been a time when he was human. His hair, grown to his shoulders, took on a dull, greasy sheen, and a foul smell rose from his chest, assaulting his nostrils. Yet, Joaquín could barely maintain the sense of his own existence because of the voice of Octavio, coming from the cart he was pulling.

"...Mmm, where are we heading...?"

Lying in the cart used for collecting scrap, Octavio, too, was drifting on the edge of sleep and wakefulness. His body and mind sunk in chaos, immersed in a muddled world. Joaquín left Octavio in the cart to rummage through deserted houses, resting in sheep pens and charnel houses. By the riverside, he made fires, filtering the black water through rags to give to Octavio. Most of the time, Octavio was tormented by passion for his no-longer-existing left leg—a prisoner of phantom pains that appeared and disappeared.

" *Carajo* [53] ... it hurts, it hurts..." Every moan from Octavio multiplied the darkness within Joaquín's psyche. Octavio's wounds tormented Joaquín as well, as if he was trapped in a vacuum. Oh, Octavio, once so strong, such a gallant figure. Unparalleled bravery, lightning speed, the potential of a true *héroe* [54] – now nowhere to be found. And Octavio now? If Joaquín disappeared here, if he left Octavio behind in his sleep with the cart, Octavio might not survive alone. He might just remain motionless like a corpse before becoming a real corpse. Clad in filthy clothes like burial shrouds, his sunken eyes housed no light, and his vulnerability as a human being overflowed more than ever. Joaquín was occupied by regret, shame, and a sense of guilt.

It really should have been Octavio who was ***chosen*** *. I left our homeland with him so he* ***wouldn't*** *end up like this. But this happened instead. Oh, the unbearable shame, I can't bear it!*

"Ugh, it hurts, it hurts..." Octavio frequently complained of pain.

It's not there , Joaquín silently said. *Your leg isn't there.*

"Hey! Where'd my left leg go?"

Your left leg was amputated , Joaquín said.

"But it hurts."

It's just a feeling. Seems like phantom limb pain.

"Damn it, the Foundation, cutting it off on their own..."

It was to save your life.

"Damn, I never thought I'd end up being *frio* [55] ."

It's not about being te quemas [56] *or frio, you know.*

"I don't get it, why were you considered *te quemas* ? "

Not like there's anything good about being in this state…

"And yet, I survived. Would've been better to die young and be a hero."

That's true. But it means you're not meant to die yet.

"So, where are we going?"

Well, what should we do?

"You got no idea, huh?"

It's not like that.

"No home to return to, huh?"

Right, our homeland is far away.

"We should probably go to the east then, huh?"

Yeah, maybe so.

"The east is better, right?"

There aren't many people there.

"Into the *selva* ?"

Maybe we should.

"The *selva* would be good, right?"

Yeah, let's go to the selva.

"In the *selva* , day or night..."

Doesn't really matter, I guess.

"Well, that's fine then."

What's fine?

"Nothing, it's just fine."

Okay. We'll leave soon then.

"Hey, can I ask something?"

Sure.

"What will you do if I die?"

I don't know. Maybe I'll want to disappear too.

"Then, we can be together."

Yeah, we can be together.

" *Vamos juntos* [57] ."

Si, vamos. [58]

Octavio lay on the cart, listening to the sound of water dripping in the jungle. There was coldness and silence. Occasionally, the night wind carried dust like remnants of a long-missed day. Ahead of them, black sandstorms blew fiercely, and the landscape was chained in the darkness of a lightless 'night.'

Aren't you cold? Joaquín asked.

"I'm not cold", Octavio's voice would reply.

The desperate despair and overwhelming complications were undeniably personal to each of them, yet at the same time, were

something they both shared together. Joaquín felt it. Things that were important to him were now severed and shut away. The immediate thing to do was to go as far away from people as possible. There was no hope anywhere.

Why did this happen? What went wrong?

"Now that it's come to this, we've got to go as far as we can," Octavio said in resignation.

But they were like two stray dogs chased by a stick. Reality was relentlessly violent, and they were utterly defeated. So, what exactly had they been defeated by? Defeated by Alhorn? Or by that 'Arrow'? Was it a grand *juego* [59] set in motion by the being who created it? Perhaps they were defeated by the harsh realities that *huérfanos* [60] face?

Did we really lose? What caused our defeat? Memories of the past kept resurfacing, biting Joaquín like a viper, forcing him into relentless rumination despite his reluctance. He had learned all the wisdom of the streets, grasped survival skills, and spared no effort to be a cog in the Foundation's wheel. He gave his all, striving to be part of the sunlit world. Yet what always dominated his path was the 'night'—

Pondering in the middle of the night definitely never leads to anything good. But for us, it's always 'night.' Octavio says to go as far as we can. But where does the 'night' meet its shore? Where is the dead end of this unending 'night'?

Unbearable hunger, pain, doubts, and an inescapable sense of guilt, along with a growing desire for revenge that fed on these feelings. The years spent wandering with all these negative emotions as their companions faded into distant memories. Exile was Joaquín and Octavio's fate. Inherent hunger and obsession can lead to dramatic leaps in life at certain moments. But rejecting the abruptly changing

reality along the way, they condemned themselves to banishment, gnashing their teeth in dark emotions that eventually morphed into something indescribable. Like creatures living blind at the bottom of dark swamps, they began to domesticate an indescribable *monstruo* within themselves.

They wandered from the Amazon's heart to its periphery and back, at one point building a hut north of Rio Branco to live as hunter-gatherers. They settled on a fan-shaped area of volcanic deposits near the lower Marañón River, and spent some seasons living with a dying tribe. As they drifted for three, to four, to five years, rumors began to spread among people in Amazonian villages and hamlets. Stories that sounded like folklore about *teporochos* dragging an endless ‘night’ with them. Those who encountered them in city outskirts or deep in the forest, even in the midst of crossing rivers, reportedly became enveloped in ‘night,’ regardless of daylight. The wanderers were a duo, with one amputee. For some reason, they never settled in one place, moving like in limbo. The rumors cultivated mouth to mouth, morphing facts into ominous tales.

"Be careful! That's not human," witnesses said. "It's so terrifying, so inexplicable, yet so bewitching like nothing I've ever seen."

"I've seen it too," some claimed.

"I think it's a *diablo* ," others thought.

"The spirits of Amazonian tribes wandering," was another rumor.

"Twin vampires hiding in the tropical *selva* ."

"One of them seemed a bit transparent," some even claimed.

Baseless rumors spread like a pandemic, embellished and dramatized by enthusiasts. The gossip found a home at the tip of

people's tongues, creating a kind of twisted sympathy where they attracted people who sought out the drifting duo. Straying from the path of ordinary life can bring one closer to the essence of living, from another perspective. Those drawn to the dark flames that Joaquín and Octavio carried were wounded outcasts, thieves, swindlers, beggars, eccentrics, con artists, and revolutionary thinkers. For such people, the perpetual 'night' was a blessing. The supernatural phenomena brought by Joaquín and Octavio were something to be revered. After all, within that darkness, one could freely indulge in night theft, surprise attacks, and nocturnal prowling!

“Butchers sell human flesh and counterfeit money and fraud are rampant. A mistress kills the lawful wife, and a sharpened kitchen knife in the early morning leads to a murder the next day. Politics will eventually be overturned, entrenched rights and interests shattered, and it might even be possible to bring down the great temple of power that has stood for decades.”

“But it's going to be night forever,” Octavio said to the man following him.

“I don't care. Revolutions start with dreams”, said a passionate sympathizer. He was a revolutionary from Ayacucho, who struggled against the growing drowsiness that intensified as he got closer to the two, yet passionately preached.

“South America, including Brazil and Peru, is seeking unprecedented change. The economy is at the brink of collapse, racial discrimination against the majority indigenous population is rampant, and poverty and inequality are unbearable. The leftist guerrillas, waving the flag of ethnic liberation, have gained surprising breadth and scale. It's no wonder that an armed revolution is supported by the people. Mao Zedong's ideology teaches the ideal of ‘peasants surrounding the city.’ Indigenismo, focused on the defense and empowerment of the indigenous people, will become a bright torch in Latin society. The world is already in darkness, which is why it is necessary to overthrow all kinds of values and reverse the established facts. Those who know the true darkness are the

ones who can be the standard bearers of a powerful torch, you understand?”

"Even if you try to recruit us, the idea of a revolution now just seems like a hassle."

Joaquín agreed with Octavio.

"If you're also an indigenous person, you've seen enough, right? The clashes between guerrillas and the military, the rampaging *policia* [61] , the massacres of farmers, cross-border shooting victims, missing persons, children dying instantly from stray bullets. I’m not asking you to stand on the front lines of battle. Just earning funds for the army can significantly propel the revolution," the man from Ayacucho explained. "There's no crop as profitable as coca. Without a doubt, that can be the source of funds for the revolution.”

Thus, Joaquín and Octavio found themselves venturing into the northeastern Amazon *selva* . In the commune, hundreds of small farmers quietly cultivated coca leaves in the lean soil. Not only was the government fervently pursuing drug eradication policies, but they also faced attacks from competing growers. Beginning with using Joaquín's ‘night’ power as a camouflage, they eventually became the guardians of the *selva* commune. The perpetual 'night'' they brought was seen almost as a miraculous sign, garnering nearly worshipful admiration.

People begged them, “It doesn’t matter that we’ll always be in the 'night', just stay here with us!"

So, they switched to greenhouse cultivation of coca, solidifying their position by mediating between the commune's farmers and drug traffickers. Like skilled guards, they enforced stable prices and fair trade, protecting the commune from unscrupulous dealers. After an elderly farm owner of the commune suddenly died from a heart attack, they effectively took over farm management and expanded

sales channels, rapidly growing the commune into a major drug organization. This was the origin of the Selva Cartel.

Joaquín and Octavio, banished from the sunlit world, had reached this state by their own path. Ceasing their life of wandering, Octavio fitted himself with a titanium prosthetic leg bought with the money they had earned. A new creature was born in the Selva commune, where their inherent hunger, guilt, and desire for revenge coincidentally intersected and parasitized, laying and hatching eggs. It was a beast that crawled out of the 'night' swamp, dripping with darkness. In the limbo between life and death, Joaquín's frozen consciousness split open, and the cracked shell of his hollowed-out spirit burst outwards with screams. In complete surrender to the dark, dark, dark, darkness, Joaquín entrusted everything to its whims. His survival instinct, devoid of passion or reason, shattered its chains and set itself free. He pounced and attacked everything in sight without restraint, biting into prey at the furthest place from reason, tearing at it ferociously, chewing and swallowing. How did it come to this? Why did he have to be chosen for such extraordinary power? Joaquín had long since abandoned his inescapable inner conflict. Committing destruction unconsciously, he stained his hands with crime, yet felt no pangs of conscience.

If this is the place Octavio meant when he said "we've got to go as far as we can," if this is the dead end of our "night," then that's fine, that's okay. If there's still something beyond, if someone is waiting on the other side of the darkness, then all we have to do is stand up and head there, if that is what he wishes.

Whether he wanted it or not, Joaquín knew that the tide would eventually turn.

Chapter 17 (XVII)

"What can we do in this situation?" Lisa Lisa pondered.

Exposing and busting the bases of drug organizations that boast significant shares in South America, as well as the huge coca production facilities, is a job for the government and the Drug Enforcement Administration. However, she also can't stand idly by and let the mass production of drugs that destroy people's lives, reasoning, ideals, good sense, and the beauty of this world, go unchallenged. Her primary mission is to eliminate the threat of ‘ *las Maravillas* ’ that rule this *selva* . Of course, this includes reclaiming

the 'Arrow,' which is the source of all, and putting a proper *restraint* on those ability users who bring harm to the world. This task takes precedence even over the control and busting of the commune itself. Even if the eradication of the cartel is unfeasible, toppling the current organizational structure is possible by capturing the leader's head. Lisa Lisa had planned to focus solely on this objective upon entering the commune. However, meeting Joaquín changed the circumstances.

"Since you're here, does that mean he's working in this commune too?"

Under certain conditions, Joaquín led the group into the commune. Their combat personnel were made to wait outside the boundary, while Lisa Lisa, Sasha, and Hernández, with their wrists bound, were escorted by other guards from all sides.

"Hey, are we human sacrifices or what?!" Sasha was clearly furious.

She could still summon her Astral even with her hands and mouth bound, but with so many capable ability users surveilling them, gaining an upper hand seemed unlikely. Joaquín had apparently allowed their entry, foreseeing such an imbalance of power. Nevertheless, this assembly that Joaquín had brought together was impressive. It's difficult to seize control when there are so many people here awakened to ' *las Maravillas* '. To assemble such a number and secure troops skilled in both offense and defense proves that the existence of 'the Arrow' is indispensable. That said, it seems inevitable to conclude that the one pulling the strings from above is *that man* —but there's no hope of a dialogue with Joaquín, and the other bodyguards remain tight-lipped.

Joaquín, leading the way, advances with the sound of his footsteps squelching on the muddy ground. He should be no different from the other men, yet to Lisa Lisa, it felt as if fate itself, if it had legs, would make such sounds while leading them somewhere.

The purple glowing coca greenhouses, residential areas, and the mining site with its drilling rig – The commune deep in the mysterious *selva* felt like a settlement built within the belly of a gigantic creature that had swallowed people long ago. There were residents everywhere, working like shadows under the lights, diligently managing the greenhouses, and families gathered around dinner tables in their homes. Perhaps due to the prosperity from coca sales, their overall standard of living seemed high. Either they had become accustomed to the endless "night," or their bodies had completely adapted to a nocturnal lifestyle; the way of life of the people was utterly simple and not different from a typical village. Indigenous people, mestizos, and other native tribes that had moved into the *selva* , seemed to be living together in groups. It could even be described as cosmopolitan, transcending racial and linguistic differences. What came to Lisa Lisa's mind was a religious community like that of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster during the Middle Ages. Indeed, there was a common object of faith here. They were isolated but compensated for by connections.

They arrived at the deepest part of the commune - where stood a building resembling a temple or place of worship. It wasn't as colossal as the Incan ruins, nor could one tell when it had been constructed, but surrounded by a grove of palm trees that seemed like a natural mutation, it boasted a quiet grandeur. The walls of its stonework towers, possibly built with ore mined from the commune, were adorned with bas-reliefs of animals and demigods, suggestive of polytheism. Joaquín and the bodyguards led the group deeper into the temple.

Torches flickering in the corridors sent sparks flying, which were then swallowed by the oppressive darkness pressing down from the ceiling of the building. Lisa Lisa kept her gaze fixed at the back of Joaquín, who was leading the way. It was definitely still 'night'. Even with lights on, it was 'night' inside this building—

Lisa Lisa mulled over his ability to perpetuate 'night' over such a vast area. It might ultimately boil down to the *negation of life* . A phenomenon that completely blocks out sunlight makes one want to consider the theory of suspended particulate matter or mass

hypnotism. However, it reduces the biological functions of those affected, erodes their bodies and minds, withers plants, and fills the air with miasmas carrying teratogenic effects. The reality that such a terrifying power could stem from none other than Joaquín's soul was almost too much to bear.

What was his heart whispering all this time? Had we always been oblivious to it? Was Joaquín living all this time while forced to embody the negation of life? Dragging along the sensation of sleep, freezing chills, a night wind that sounds like someone weeping, a sense of impending doom, and a darkness that has lasted for a dozen years or more—

" *Is this really all there is to it?* " she wondered. This power hasn't revealed its full extent yet. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it. Joaquín hadn't revealed his Astral yet. That alone suggested he was hiding something. Lisa Lisa's intuition was sounding an alarm. There was still something more.

In the innermost room of the temple, someone who made it their lair was waiting. The room was not as grand as a royal chamber, nor as crude as a barracks for common soldiers. When the door opened, Lisa Lisa’s vision was momentarily overwhelmed as if thousands of fireworks had burst into the air. When she hesitantly raised her half-closed eyelids, she saw that what had appeared to glow was, in fact, the flames from a few dozen torches. Fixed to wall brackets and shelves, they scattered sparks all around. Fragrant Palo Santo wood was burned in silver incense burners, and a shaman was also performing prayers using tobacco concoctions. Yet this aged practitioner was not the master of the room.

The true master was a robust-looking man lying on a bed made by joining two long benches. His legs were stretched out, wrapped in a pure white sheet, as he leisurely smoked a pipe. His movements in inhaling the smoke were lethargic, as if just roused from a deep sleep. His silhouette was almost shadow-like in the firelight, with each movement of the pipe to his lips creating overlapping contours. The flickering torch flames lit up the man's eyes that had just

awakened from a dream.

"So, it's you. You've certainly aged..."

His bristly hair had grown long and hung down. His face, grown a beard, exuded a more profound presence with age. His eyes, ablaze with intense emotions, did not avert their gaze from facing Lisa Lisa and the others.

"How old are you? How have you escaped death? That's the biggest mystery."

"Since he's here in this *selva* ," Lisa Lisa's gaze shifted from Joaquín back to the man in front. "Then it only makes sense that you'd be here as well, huh?"

"Wait, what's going on?" Sasha interjected. "...So it's not the man who we were expecting? There's no way you're going to say *you're el Jefe* of the Selva Cartel, are you?"

Seated in the depths of the temple was an indigenous man with a prosthetic leg, exuding the dignity of a hierophant, smoking tobacco like a wealthy man of leisure. Sasha and Hernández knew his face well. For Lisa Lisa, he was a symbol of long-standing remorse, one of the *huérfanos* they were searching for. His name, renowned for his boldness, was -

O…?

Octavi…?

Octavio!

Finally, the long-awaited main character makes his entrance!

The one who should have been exulting with a triumphant cry, as he always did in the past, was Joaquín, but this time he seemed to have missed the opportunity. Lisa Lisa and her group were not taken aback by simply encountering someone in the commune. The issue at hand was that Octavio had appeared just as they were finally about to confront *el Jefe* of the organization that had long been hiding in the shadows.

"It's me. I'm the one in charge here," Octavio declared coolly, his voice hoarse.

"You're the one running the Selva Cartel…" Lisa Lisa's voice also turned raspy. "You were the one who gave the orders to intercept anyone, who hung the bodies of the victims from the trees…"

"We have to protect what's ours, don't we? It's necessary to set an example."

"So all the inhumane acts, the abductions of foreigners, the smuggling of cobalt... You're behind all of them?"

"We have to make a living. I have to provide for the people here. That's how it works, right?"

He spoke nonchalantly, but Lisa Lisa could sense something unsettling beneath his demeanor. His eyes seemed to question her. *Are you the kind to question the meaning of everything, to question the act of living itself?*

"And what about you? Looks like you've had quite a fight with my guys. What do you want?"

"Really, you're going to ask 'what do you want'?" Sasha snapped back, biting at every word.

“I'll keep saying it. Over and over again. I get you're not just some feeble old timer. The Ripple, was it? Does that technique extend life itself, keep old age at bay? Anybody would be on guard if a wrinkled Ripple user just waltzed deep into the *selva* . Or what, have you come to give me compensation for this left leg now? Are you here to apologize for carelessly chopping off my precious limb?"

With that, Octavio flaunted his prosthetic leg with a couple of bangs on the bed. Various items that were placed on the long-bench bed - a meal tray, an ashtray, and several books - bounced from the vibration, and dust was stirred into the air.

"Honestly, I thought your Foundation would contact us sooner. We have a bunch of people here who can produce *Fantasmas* ," said Octavio, glancing at Joaquín and the bodyguards. "Your Foundation's research must have advanced, but nothing beats collecting data in the field. *Fantasmas* and their users attract each other like magnets. They tend to gather in one place."

"So you’re the one who gathered them here?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Of course, using the Arrow."

"But the Arrow was supposed to be with that man..."

"You're slow, aren't you? You mean Alhorn, right? How many years do you think have passed since then? We'd been drawn to each other and had our second meeting a long time ago."

"Alhorn and you? When did this happen?" Hernández asked.

"Quite a while back. When was it again?" It wasn't Joaquín who Octavio was asking, but instead, he pulled away the tangled sheets on the bed, revealing a dome-like cage buried underneath. He sat up, grabbed the handle, and repositioned the cage next to his waist, making its contents clearly visible to the guests.

A head?

Whose head was it?

Alhorn's head.

They were speechless, as if time had warped around them. It was as if a window to *infierno* [62] had opened around Octavio. At first, they thought it might be a shrunken head made by the Amazonian tribes, but no. It wasn't shrunken with tannin, nor was it sewn at the eyelids and lips, nor adorned with feathers or the elytra of beetles. The severed head was placed in a birdcage that was just the right size for it. Lisa Lisa was at a loss for words. Sasha and Hernández were also reeling from the shock as if struck in the chest with a log, forgetting even to breathe. Octavio, toying with his adversary's head, was akin to a bored deity from mythology. Surrounded by a ghastly and imposing scene, Octavio's face grew increasingly stern.

"Do you think I don't feel gratitude? I do. The Foundation took us in. Mr. Hernández educated us thoroughly, and Señora was strong and cool even though she was already an *abuela* back then. But as you can see, we've become independent. I let you in because it's you, but please, don't meddle with our business here. Leave and forget about this place."

"Right, Joaquín?" Octavio asked for confirmation, and Joaquín slightly lowered his eyes, giving a firm nod in agreement.

Time had indeed warped. They were no longer the same people. The bizarre containment of the head in the birdcage alone displayed the change of ideals in the *Huérfanos de la Tormenta* [63] —and the evil that had grown within Octavio.

Here, their diverging destinies had merged into one space, with the years of separation condensed into a single night, stretching a single night into a thousand years.

“As you know, ‘ *la Maravilla* ’ this guy awakened to is incredible," Octavio said. “It’s an insane ability that can turn the world upside down. You were the one who named his power, weren't you, Alhorn?" Octavio spoke to the head in the cage.

"Right? Say something."

"His 'night' ability?" Lisa Lisa asked.

"El Aleph, that's what you called it."

"What did you say?"

"Are you hard of hearing? Don't miss it - El Aleph."

A most unusual prophecy from a distant Andean lake was somehow connected here—

Sighing, Lisa Lisa closed her eyes. The next moment, the air subtly changed. Sasha and Hernández groaned. Alhorn's head suddenly opened its eyes, snapping to attention as the name "El Aleph" acted like a fishing hook lifting his eyelids.

"Hello, madam," the head spoke.

So, this was indeed the true underworld. *How grotesque and repulsive!* A semi-mummified head, still retaining the contours of human flesh despite decaying, moved its dry lips. The eyeballs, like creatures trapped in a skull's prison, rolled wildly, the right cheek pulsed grotesquely as if in spasm, and the corners of the mouth twitched as if having forgotten how to smile. The scene was more unpleasant than seeing twenty or thirty corpses piled up. Tropical flies crawled on his earthy skin, flying around, trying to lay eggs in his nose, mouth, and ears. But Alhorn had not been given even a hoofed animal's tail worth of capability to swat the insects away. His eyes were blazing and his voice full of grumbling bitterness as he strained to speak.

"I was away for a bit. Lucky me, lucky me! Thought I was dead, but maybe not. Both sides are pretty bad. I've got a fever actually. Touch my forehead. It's swollen with a temperature of forty degrees, I've got chills. Can't you ask the Madam to hurry up and kill me?"

"You got what you deserved, didn't you? Look, this man miraculously turned out this way."

Octavio began conversing with the head in the birdcage. He wasn't adoring it like a pet, nor boasting about it like a *tsantsa* [64] trophy of war. He disregarded Alhorn's sycophantic, flattering tone and treated him dismissively, yet this very attitude was effectively intimidating.

"Ignoring this guy just makes him keep chirping endlessly."

"Ah, creak, creak, creak, creak, my bones are creaaakiiing ! Give me some water."

"There was a time when he tried to dominate solely with his words, but now he's pretty submissive."

"If you kill me, I'll be quiet. Forever quiet. Let's make a *deal* ."

"The Foundation thought you were the one on the throne here."

"A throne? A king is still a king even without a throne."

"Clearly, that isn’t the case for you."

"I am, uhh , I am..."

“Tell them, in your own words, what happened."

"The night came. El Aleph descended..."

Unimaginable cataclysms, the pinnacle of paranormal phenomena, and the currents of time swirl and converge to a single point in the past. Surprisingly, Octavio was trying to assign the narration role to the head in the birdcage. Alhorn agreed to it, performing the one action left to him as a being now limited to speech. With unbroken verbosity like cascading sand—the head narrates the events of a distant night long past, his second encounter with Octavio and Joaquín.

Chapter 18 (XVIII)

Long time no see. It’s me, Alhorn. You okay with it being me? To be fair, I might be the only one who can tell you about the threat of the

'night' that attacked me back then. After all, I'm the one who unleashed that ' *alma gritando* [65] ' with my Arrow, so I guess you could say there's something like a manufacturer's liability? When these folks approached us under the guise of a business deal in the state of Bahia, I immediately recognized them from that day, so I decided to test out their abilities on the spot. Kind of me, right? Back then, I had started multi-faceted businesses, and was illicitly producing firearms to sell to guerrillas at a factory in Salvador. When a previously unheard-of, up-and-coming cartel reached out wanting to buy in bulk and asked to meet *el Jefe* in person before seeing the manufacturing site, I made sure to verify their background before arranging a factory tour. It became clear the moment I saw the two men who came with their guards that their interest wasn't in our firearms. The one with the prosthetic leg was Octavio, and the other was Joaquín, I believe. Their main motive for approaching me using cunning schemes was vengeance. Octavio was gnashing his teeth, grinding his molars as if they were about to shatter. Joaquín was scowling, watching intently, but I could tell he had a pale flame burning in his gut. If this was about revenge, Joaquín was the right temperature.

Octavio was just too much. His emotions were boiling over uncontrollably. His fierce anger and endless wrath erupted like a torrent—his blood vessels pulsating like a freshly lit fuse. Trying to settle a vendetta because his life got ruined by the Arrow, huh? What a predictable, low-intelligence *hijo de puta* [66] . I chuckled to myself and asked them if they both had been chosen by the Arrow. Their survival meant just that, but the ability one awakens depends on the person's own qualities. You might just get a piss-poor *Fantasma* —inferior even to the semen in a used condom dribbling out like an *abuelo* 's [67] leftover pee. It's people like Joaquín who bring out remarkable *Fantasmas* that leave you impressed. Those who harbor more concerns and ambitions than others can produce an *espíritu grande* [68] . I pressed him to show me his a *lma gritando* . Octavio, on the other hand, was spouting insignificant lines that aren't even worth mentioning. Stuff like 'do you know who we are?' or 'you're the *diablo* ,'—cheap, dreary lines you could buy by the pound. The *diablo* ? Octavio, you're not the only one to have called me that, but I don't affirm or deny what I've been called. I've been called by a dozen names before— *diablo* , *villano* [69] , *parca* [70] , *asesino* [71] , Mephistopheles—but no matter what I'm called, my sole and greatest interest lies in the potential of the *Fantasma* that the person in front of me can wield.

I killed several of the guards they brought right there to show the guns they wanted to buy had no issues. I provoked them to draw out their *Fantasmas* , but oddly, neither of them revealed anything. Like gunslingers in a spaghetti western who don't draw their guns from the holster right away. I sensed something strange. Looking outside the transom window, it was dark, even though I set the factory tour during the day. It wasn't due to an unexpected *eclipse solar total* [72] , so was this the work of one of their *Fantasmas* ? I was unfamiliar with any ability that turned an entire area into 'night.' I didn't get what was going on… It was bad, real bad. Realizing the danger of whatever was happening, I decided to unleash my rarely used *Fantasma* to protect myself. Even when I'm alone without any guards, it lurks in my shadow, sharing my nerves, bones, and irises, awaiting my command. It's an extension of my senses, and I can freely command it. A mechanical ringing sound echoed in my head as black smoke billowed from my body, swirling into a spiral, then consolidating into a human shape at a single point. At my beck and call, my *Fantasma* promptly readied itself for combat. I called out its name.

"El Corazón de las Tinieblas" [73]

Joaquín was indeed tracking the movement of the *Fantasma* with his eyes. On the other hand, Octavio gave a 'hmm?' reaction, which I didn't miss. He kept glaring at me, not at the newly appeared *Fantasma* . If he couldn't see it, it meant he hadn't awakened yet. I didn't get why he had survived. The prosthetic leg... I realized then. The 'Arrow' I shot from the crossbow had pierced his leg. The Speedwagon Foundation amputated that leg, preventing the lethal poison from spreading through his body and saving his life. In that case, Octavio was of no concern at all. *Fantasmas* can only be confronted by other *Fantasmas* . Ordinary people can't even see the attacks coming or the phenomena occurring and would die in agony.

My *Fantasma* is called Heart of Darkness in English, though I also call it El Corazón. It looks like a warrior from the ancient Inca Empire, wearing a mask with curved *bocinas* [74] like a god of death. Its muscular torso and limbs shine with the gleam of chrome steel, and its massive fists dangle. The whole body exudes an aura

of dripping sadism, bloodthirstiness, ferocious cruelty, and mercilessness. I'm captivated by its savage beauty that's off the charts. No living creature with such an extraordinary appearance exists anywhere on this Earth.

I commanded El Corazón to annihilate. " *Vamos* ." El Corazón leaped over the factory machinery, charging directly at Joaquín. A gunman who doesn't draw when his opponent has already drawn doesn't exist. El Corazón slammed its fist at Joaquín, who dodged to the side at the last moment. He could definitely see it. Octavio rushed to the fallen Joaquín.

"Ahh, ahh, ahh". Joaquín groaned as if alerting his partner, but it was unclear what he was saying. Yet Octavio responded, "Yeah, I understand." It was as if they could communicate without words. El Corazón didn't stop, launching attacks at both of them. Joaquín pushed Octavio away, and evaded the attacks to the right. El Corazón leaped and descended with its fists. Joaquín pulled back, evading again. The wire mesh scaffolding where El Corazón punched deformed, making Joaquín suddenly fall into a cavity that opened up at his feet. El Corazón hammered its fists into it, striking at incredible speed beyond what an ordinary human could see.

"Is that all you can do, dodge?" I taunted . "Why don't you release your *Fantasma* ? Are you guys big-balled *bailarinas de ballet* [75] or what? You wanna go prance around in tutus performing 'Swan Lake'?"

Despite being punched repeatedly, Joaquín deflected and evaded El Corazón's fists with his arms. He was able to directly defend himself? Dark spots, like stains of a black night, appeared on his arms, shoulders, and neck. This meant the manifestation of a *Fantasma* can vary greatly, sometimes appearing without a physical form. If these spots were a form of *Fantasma* , it explained how he could withstand El Corazón's attacks.

El Corazón didn't stop. Joaquín kept screaming, protecting Octavio.

His noise was probably to signal El Corazón's position. I turned the attack towards Octavio. As Joaquín tried to shield him, I blew him aside and concentrated El Corazón's fists on Octavio, relentlessly striking. Shiny silver droplets burst out.

Then, Octavio began to *transform* .

"AH, AH, AAHHHHHH..."

Octavio was howling like Joaquín.

"Ohoho, little Octavio, you've turned into such a *forma interesante* [76] ," I laughed mockingly.

Octavio no longer had his original form. He was drenched in his own blood and bodily fluids. His blood dripped sluggishly with pieces of skin mixed in. He looked like a distorted drawing. Octavio’s blood vessels emerged like blurred plumes of feather on his skin. His hands lay deflated like discarded gloves, and bone shards protruding from his mouth broke through his lips. Octavio was convulsing and screaming as if having a seizure, crushing his own exposed blood vessels. I knew what had happened. El Corazón’s fists had switched Octavio’s ‘blood vessels’ with his ‘body hair’ and his ‘hand and finger bones’ with his ‘teeth’.

Oh, you don’t get it? It's hard to paint a vivid picture in your mind, isn't it? That's why I'm telling you all this. Anyway, this is the power of 'El Corazón de las Tinieblas.' My *Fantasma* boasts extraordinary destructive power and speed, and is unbeaten in close combat. But that’s not all; when it strikes, it scatters innumerable mercury-like droplets, switching around the 'composition' within objects or organisms. Understand? It's an *exchange* . What if I use this power on a human body? Let’s say, swapping their 'nails' with their 'teeth,' or their 'eyeballs' with their 'testicles.' I've even swapped 'both arms' with 'both legs.’ It doesn’t matter whether it’s skin, bones, muscle fibers, or viscera—I can switch hard parts with soft, or large parts

with small ones, like forcing mismatched pieces into a puzzle. Since the dimensions and masses are all different, destruction and deformity ensue wherever the swaps occur.

Since I'm spilling the beans anyways, I'll let you in on its *reglas* [77] now :

(i) It only happens where El Corazón strikes with its fists.

(ii) The target must be something I have an intricate knowledge of, that I can fully visualize in detail, like firearms or the human body.

(iii) I can't decide which parts to swap. It's sort of a *juego* [78] , but as I've become more skilled, I've been able to increasingly make the swaps that I want to.

Of course, I would never reveal this during a fight. Those who get hit by El Corazón can't comprehend what's happening to them, and since no one has ever survived before, I've never had to explain it to anyone. It's really amusing to watch the unquestionable shape of a human body just drastically transform though. I'd look down on them while they're going mad and bawling. Meddling with El Corazón de las Tinieblas within human bodies is like disrupting the designs crafted by *el Creador* [79] —by plunging my hands in and chaotically mixing them up, like an *ebrio* [80] kneading clay until it's an unsightly mess.

My victory was decided at that point. Octavio was already incapacitated; all that was left was to finish off Joaquín. Joaquín, still covered in the black sludge, quickly hid behind some equipment. So, I just continued tormenting Octavio. El Corazón swapped his 'right ear' with his 'left toe,' his 'left collarbone' with his 'kneecap,' his 'left leg' with his 'right arm,' and his 'right eighth rib' with his 'left sternocleidomastoid muscle.' Hahaha, can't even imagine what he

looked like now, can you? It's tough, eh? You gotta use your imagination to the fullest when you're listening to me. Anyway, I figured messing up Octavio would force his other half to jump out. But then that Octavio bastard started yelling, "Don't you come over heeereee!" or something like that. Heeding his words, Joaquín didn't take the bait and abandoned fighting alongside his partner, dispersing instead. It didn't seem like he intended to run, but I saw him heading up the stairs to the ground floor. Whether he'd forsaken their damp bond or planned to lure me out and away from Octavio, I saw through his ploy and took the bait. Together with El Corazón, I ascended the stairs and scoured the mansion for him.

Joaquín would occasionally show himself but quickly turn corners and slip from room to room, refusing to fight me head-on. El Corazón, with enough force to topple the mansion, punched walls, furniture, dropped chandeliers, and destroyed staircases, transforming the mansion itself into a maze. It changed the positions of walls, complicated the corridors, and performed makeshift construction on the rooms, creating a labyrinth that would swallow up and trap my prey. I was itching to drive El Corazón's fist into that eyesore Joaquín. El Corazón always aims for the *corazón* [81] — the beautiful and sublime pump that should be called *el Creador*'s finest masterpiece. It'd be nice to just toss that thing out of his rib cage. Let's say I pounded on his chest and an 'exchange' between his 'nose' and his 'heart' occurred, then victory would be mine. I'd just have to smash that muscly-like apple thing appearing on the center of the face. Who wouldn't want to deliver such a brilliant *ultimo golpe* [82] ?

But I underestimated them. I misjudged what it meant for these two to be together. Their communication far exceeded that of ordinary people. If I pursued Joaquín, Octavio would be open, and if I focused on Octavio, Joaquín would be free. Even though my El Corazón has exceptional destructive power and speed, it can't exert its power over a wide range like Dos Santos's 'La Casa Verde,' so I inevitably had to engage in close combat to hit them with punches. The cornered Joaquín was enveloped in some kind of intensely dense aura of the 'night' which was frightening. It was a true, impenetrable darkness. It was so thick I could hardly see his body. While I pressed on, I couldn't let my guard down, unsure what trump card he might have. I cautiously brought El Corazón closer to him,

closing the distance little by little so it could get into range. But in doing so, I left myself open. The next moment, I felt a piercing shock from behind. It's a common strategy in *Fantasma* battles to target the user controlling the *Fantasma* , but I hadn't expected Octavio, who was deformed and destroyed by El Corazón, could pursue me on his own.

His arms and legs were swapped, fingers sprouted from where his ears should be, bone spurs protruded from his neck and mouth, and his whole skeleton was out of order, yet Octavio stood up on his own, climbed the stairs, and accurately followed me through the labyrinthine mansion? I swear, that was impossible. There were no signs of communication between them after Joaquín climbed the stairs.

It was too strange. Impossibly strange, right?

Octavio, staggering like a decaying *no-muertos* [83] , approached me with astonishing courage and strength, and stabbed me with his left leg, which had been previously swapped with his right arm. His left leg was his prosthetic leg. Some prosthetics are controlled through surface electromyography signals detected at the point of adhesion to the body, which must have made it be considered as a part of Octavio's body. In medieval Europe, there were knights who used iron prosthetic arms and legs as weapons, and Octavio must have had the same intention, keeping the tip of his titanium prosthetic leg sharpened.

“Thanks for making it easier to stab you,” Octavio hissed right in my ear.

He turned El Corazón's ability against me and struck the *ultimo golpe* . This duo was strange. I realized they had always intended to fight two against two from the beginning. The aim of Octavio and Joaquín's divide-and-conquer tactic was to separate me from El Corazón. Stabbed in the abdomen, I quickly called El Corazón back to counter Octavio, but it was caught by Joaquín's *Fantasma* . Why Joaquín didn't use it from the start, I don't know. Maybe it put a

strain on him, or he needed time to concentrate before activating it. El Corazón couldn't return to me. Above Joaquín's head arose a whirl of 'night', and what spewed from there bit into El Corazón—

Mierda [84] , I don't want to recount that thing . *Por favor, perdóname* *[85]* . Such a thing shouldn't exist in this world. It wasn't normal. I'm not one to talk, but there's no way the *cabrón* *[86]* who concocted that is a sane and good-hearted person.

You get it now, how bizarre these guys are? What's wrong with them? Any idiot can see in a battle of *Fantasmas* against *Fantasmas* w hat's odd about their way of fighting. We were wrong about them from the start, and by the time I realized that, it was too late.

I was thrown down, and something latched onto my throat. It wasn't Octavio pressing down on me. Damage to a *Fantasma* reflects back on its user–When the throat of El Corazón, overpowered by what Joaquín had created, was crushed, so was mine. A blast of hot air like a beast's exhale blew over my face. Blood spurted out. My blood. Trying to fend off the crushing force, my blood, saliva, and flesh splattered helplessly. It felt scorchingly hot. El Corazón and I were nearly having our throats ripped out. Searing agony, like being burned, scorched in from my mouth and ears to the inside of my body. Blood spurting from my severed carotid artery scorched my throat and tongue, instantly evaporating my overflowing tears. I felt my consciousness sinking into a murky night. I croaked out a call. A call for my *Fantasma* .

El Corazón, mustering its last strength to shift its stance, lashed out with fists at Joaquín's *Fantasma* . But the switch didn't take effect. Or rather, I couldn't even tell if it worked because its appearance didn't change no matter what was swapped. I was usually mesmerized by ferocious beings, but I couldn't find any beauty in this. I was engulfed in a fear like being sucked into an infinite void. I brought El Corazón back and, in a last-ditch effort, showered myself with a barrage of punches. In the moment when my neck was severed and my head separated from my torso, my *Fantasma*

performed its last job. It swapped my 'heart' with my 'right cheekbone', creating a successful bypass in my blood vessels while keeping the ventricles and atria intact, maintaining blood circulation and metabolic cell activity.

So that's why I'm here as just a talking head now. As I rolled over, Octavio's prosthetic leg, which had been restored back to normal, approached my ninety-degree-tilted vision. Probably because I had lost my body, El Corazón disappeared, and I could tell its abilities had lost their effectiveness. Octavio grabbed my hair, lifted my head to face him eye-to-eye, and then asked, “So, where is that 'Arrow' now?”

Chapter 19 (XIX)

Everything was moving at an accelerated pace. Retribution and usurpation had been carried out. The clash of extraordinary powers. The boundary between reality and illusion had disappeared. The point of no return had long passed. The miasma of 'night,' seeping in from beyond the walls, intensified the cavern-like temple's flames. Alhorn, who had been speaking as if possessed, fell silent. After a monologue about events seemingly not of this world, an appropriate silence enveloped those who had arrived here across the years.

The tale recounted a supernatural bloody battle and the rise of ' *la Maravilla* ' that was terrifying—From Alhorn's tirade of bitter resentment, one could sense the depth of his malevolent thoughts. As a head unnaturally prolonged in death and subjected to

unrelenting torment, his eyes blazed with a fierce, icy fire, embodying the chill of absolute zero.

"So, after accomplishing your revenge," Sasha broke the silence. "You took the 'Arrow' and eased yourself into Alhorn's *silla heredera* [87] , just like that? You've completely imitated what your predecessor tried to do, building a private army of ability users. That's this Selva Cartel, right?"

"I couldn't understand half of that story, but..." Hernández interjected. "That means the 'Arrow' is in your hands now. Then hand it over. We may not be law enforcers, but that thing should be recovered and securely managed by the Foundation."

Relying on their old ties, Hernández looked pleadingly at Octavio and Joaquín in turn.

"We fought on the same side before! We've seen many hardships and tragedies!" Hernández raised his voice, appealing to the consciences of the two men. "You're different from Alhorn. You should understand why the 'Arrow' can't be left unattended. Right, Joaquín?"

Joaquín appeared weary. Bowing his head, he deeply sighed as if his breath could bury his ankles. He cast a heavy gaze at Alhorn, perhaps furious at having his past follies and foolish behaviors exposed. Beside him were ability users, their attitudes clearly showing admiration and devotion towards Octavio. The faces of ten to twenty people, lined up side by side, all seemingly impaled by the same arrow of fanaticism.

“You're too naive, Mr. Hernández, too naive…”

Now, Octavio’s stern look almost seemed malevolent. Evil is always swallowed up by a greater evil. In this case, it was Octavio who had

overthrown Alhorn.

"Even after hearing what that head (Alhorn) said, you can still say something so half-hearted? I'm sure the señoras understand we're past that stage. I'm not his successor, nor do I intend to mimic him, but having the 'Arrow' in my hand or not makes a big difference. I can't just hand it over to you."

"So… that means we'll be forced to witness what even Alhorn couldn't speak of." Sasha's words made Joaquín visibly tense up.

Lisa Lisa noticed the subtle change and tilted her head. *According to Alhorn, Joaquín had summoned something that* ***shouldn't exist in this world*** *. That's the greatest threat to us right now. Alhorn also said that* ***these two*** *are bizarre. Considering how exaggerated those warnings about him are, wasn't that reaction just now overly naive? Joaquín, what are you—Under this never-ending 'night,' what are you protecting, and what are you trying to accomplish? What is happening to you?*

Before they knew it, Octavio too was intently looking at Joaquín, then slowly returned his gaze back to Lisa Lisa and Sasha.

"That depends on you guys. In this world, every day is a matter of life and death. You don't even need to step into a drug cartel, life on this continent has always been too cheap..." Octavio said. "We've always only been able to prove our worth by surviving each day. To survive, we couldn't dull our split-second judgments and instincts, nor be hindered by regret or guilt. To live, we abandoned our homeland and turned our backs on the Foundation. We delved deep into the Amazon, into the depths of the rainforest, into the darkness. There's no way out for us, having sunk so deeply. I know that already", he continued.

"Joaquín was awakened by the 'Arrow,' and I was awakened by Joaquín's power. The 'night' given to us was *perfecto* [88] ,

transparente [89] , and *puro* [90] . It was rich in *imaginación* [91] and *creatividad* [92] . We lived only within the 'night,' going beyond reason and ethics."

They only used the 'night' to fend off immediate threats. Their basic instincts drove them into action, creating new realities and principles. Escaping colonial rule or the countryside dominating the city wasn't enough; their survival dictated aligning themselves with conflict and murder, bearing arms, trading drugs, and blurring the lines between the purposes and values of their actions.

"We're in a state of war," Octavio declared. "The Third World War has long begun. It's not nations fighting nations, but individuals against individuals. As that head (Alhorn) said, a modern king is still a king without a kingdom. The clock of South America will be turned back by several centuries when individuals bare their desires and wield 'royal power,' blowing away governance systems and disparities between the rich and poor. In an era where an individual's power rivals that of an army, you can't afford to be unarmed, especially when even more terrifying things may come to life. To survive the coming *república bananera* [93] era , we sell cocaine and use the power of the 'night.'"

Perhaps this was the price paid for the 'night' they had become mired in. For over a decade, they lived solely in the 'night,' eventually tumbling down to this empty throne in the temple. Yet, in the end, much of this was due to Octavio's own nature. Isn't that evident when looking at Joaquín? Despite sharing unbearable suffering, Joaquín seems to be naturally drifting away from his partner, whose ideology seems to be nothing more than survival.

Lisa Lisa knew that one cannot question the morality of someone who has reached their breaking point. *Why do people live, even when they have reached such extremes? I wonder, having reached this age myself. For Octavio, who drifted to the world's outskirts—it's because his actions and purpose have already become one. I've lived to this age because I mastered the Ripple. Octavio commits evil with the abilities they've gained.*

Enormous profits said to be in the billions of dollars, bribing authorities, political power capable of completely overthrowing established cartels, combined with Octavio's own imperial ambitions and talents, fueled his wildly running soul. His desires grew deep within him, gnawing at his innards, and led him to see acts of massacre and lawlessness as an outlet for his rage. Immense power has always been the proof of the righteousness of heretical beliefs. Everyone fawns and flatters in the dynasty he built, none daring to disobey their orders. Those who refused to submit were dealt with by the 'night'.

In other words, I can own this world. Both the eternal 'night' and the reality beyond it. Dios Mio Maravilloso! Maravilloso ! Maravilloso! [94]

He lives in order to be admired and to fortify his authority, wealth, and faith even further. To endlessly protect and maintain his reign, his boundless power, and his bottomless authority.

To Lisa Lisa, Octavio seemed like his mind was made. *His resolve was unbreakable.* She recalled her foster father and Ripple mentor, Straizo—He was an exceptional Ripple warrior, yet he fell to vampirism, ensnared by the allure of eternal youth. He killed his own disciples, and attempted to do the same to Robert E. O. Speedwagon. In the end, he was defeated by Joseph in New York, and dissipated while emitting light like a disco ball due to the power of his own Ripple. Or perhaps he was like one of the Pillar Men—who grinned as he turned to dust, hinting at a complete detachment from evil. The anomalous nature of Octavio, who even subjugated Alhorn, was reminiscent of the ultimate lifeform leader she once faced.

She was reminded of the chilling sensation she felt when confronted with their purely closed-off systems of logic. It was like having an icicle thrust down her throat, and gravity weighed on her stomach like her insides were being crushed. Perhaps Octavio had changed due to the self-poisoning by the infinite ‘night’. His soul, fragile with hunger, and his intense emotions from reaching extreme limits,

along with the arrogance of merely trying to prolong his life, might have been what rightfully seated him upon this throne.

The final moment was drawing near.

"What are you doing? Enough already, release it!"

Emotions accelerated. The flames of life from all who had gathered were burning. Octavio didn't wait for his consent, even wanting to put down Lisa Lisa and the others. But Joaquín didn't move. He didn't break his upright stance, nor did he respond to Octavio's demands.

“Joaquín, we… we have no other way to live, damn it!”

The other bodyguards prepared for combat, materializing their Astrals and surrounding the group. The jailers of *infierno* [95] crowded around the king's chamber of the temple like a cocktail party. Sasha summoned her birds to release the group from their restraints, and soon, large and monstrous birds swarmed in. Joaquín, frozen in place, strained his voice to appeal to Octavio.

"Ah-ah-ah, ahhhhhh..."

Indeed, Joaquín was defying Octavio, visibly shaking with agitation and grief. The two, who had never once strayed from their shared fate, now stood in opposition. Lisa Lisa could feel his intentions penetrating her heart. It was as if Joaquín was shouting. He didn't want to *release it* . He was saying it's wrong to *unleash that* on these people.

"You're going to abandon me here? You’re really going to betray me in this situation…?"

"Ah-ah-ah, ahhh..."

"We can't go back, there's no turning back. We still have a future ahead of us. There are still sights for us to see. That's why I won't hand over the ‘Arrow'. It’s ours to use."

"Ah-ah, ahhhh..."

"We're supposed to go as far as we can together, right?"

"Ah-ah-ah, ahhhhhhhh!"

"This place isn’t it. It’s not as far as we can go yet. It’s eat or be eaten. They'll annihilate this place, and we'll be crushed. They’ll tear us apart and I'll be buried forever."

"Ah-ah, ahhhh..." Joaquín fell silent. He shuddered.

"Don't be stupid, you can still turn back. Even if the 'night' doesn't end, you can find a different way to live!" Sasha and Hernández called out, but in the end, Joaquín succumbed to Octavio. He was stirred up as if swallowed by an explosion. Violently shaken, his rationality reaped away and forcibly assimilated with Octavio's resolute will, surrendering to impulse. Lisa Lisa realized that it had been this way since the beginning.

They’ve always been like this, whether with us or otherwise. Ah, I’m starting to understand— ***I'm finally beginning to see it.*** *The true nature of the fate surrounding them.*

Fear and terror danced about, while malice and hatred swirled around. The bodyguards, one after another, fell into wickedness, and even Joaquín, who was on the verge of raising the flag of rebellion, was swallowed up by the crucible.

"Devour them," Octavio uttered as he stood up, announcing the start of a solemn ceremony. "El Aleph..."

The building shook with cries, laments, and shouts. Black gas like the fingers of countless dead streamed in from all directions, snuffing out most of the torch flames with a sizzle. A darkness, far beyond any measure of density, swirled above Joaquín's head, converging and contracting towards a single point in the depths. A floating orb of darkness—a sphere without a circumference, where all the 'nights' of the earth, every 'night' experienced by all of mankind, coalesced seamlessly.

When Joaquín fluttered his hands and fingers like a shadow play, the seams of darkness unraveled like thin fibers spraying out. These black hair-like strands branched within the center of the sphere, forming a rib-like cage and solidifying into a cocoon-like mass that fell. From the center of the dense, swirling vortex, a coagulated mass of darkness was spewed out.

It was...

It was born.

It was sown upon the earth.

First, it struck the birds. Then, it bore down on Sasha too. They were not a single entity. They attacked Hernández and Lisa Lisa as well. From the bowels of the night. From the wounds of the night. Skeletons woven from the fibers of the night took form with blood and flesh, as if all kinds of calamities were seeping out.

Oh, of all people, how could Joaquín be the one to conjure such things? How could his soul materialize something like this? Joaquín had *sculpted* the 'night' with his own hands, giving birth to life. *A completely light-independent, ravenous life that doesn't exist anywhere on earth, let alone the Amazon.*

In the darkness, it became necessary to secure a line of sight. Hernández used a flashlight, and some of the bodyguards lit theirs too. But although a few lit up, some of them immediately went out. It

was better for their sanities to have their views obscured anyway. If illuminated, the light would reveal a chaos indescribable by mere words, a lawless realm where a blend of nightmares and fantasies roamed and reigned. Numerous creatures, never to be found in any habitat, whether in the tropics or the poles, the high mountains or the deep sea, the oceans or freshwater or land, continuously multiplied and expanded while biting and latching onto their prey. Possibly lacking self-awareness or agency, they seemed to be a single entity yet multiple at the same time. No thoughts, but merely existing, reacting, and feeding. Their sizes varied from human-sized to gigantic, each individual unique. A grotesque hybrid of crustaceans and cnidarians slithered toward Sasha with a squelching sound to attack her.

A creature crawled with a dome-shaped head fringed with jellyfish-like folds at the edges, extending iridescent chitinous multi-segmented legs. Multiple organisms writhed together, combining to create swim bladders, tentacles, digestive organs, and a kind of nematocyst, forming a creature resembling a Portuguese man o'war. A creature with eight stout legs arranged in four pairs, arc-shaped mouths lined with serrated teeth, and no eyes, resembling a giant tardigrade. A creature moved straight ahead, continuously producing new individuals from a mouth occupying most of its head, as if shedding its skin. A frightening, worm-like creature covered in cilia. A cnidarian likely to be forty meters long. An invertebrate with crowned proboscises. A carnivorous sponge. A mollusk covered in mucus with scissor-like limbs and an armored exoskeleton. A clawed slug with multiple heads like the Hindu god Vishnu. An arthropod with rows of spiracles like insect mouths. And finally, a giant long-legged creature like a crane fly with four wings, broke through the temple ceiling, causing a rain of debris.

This congregation of 'night' surpassed the wonders of the Burgess Shale fauna, as a colony of non-living or perhaps semi-living entities. They were eldritch beings only dwelling in the spiritual ocean lying in the deepest recesses of the human psyche, born from primal fears and human terror. Each one was a nucleus of an eerily writhing concept, a universe swirling within itself. These entities, spawned like the Cambrian explosion, swept through space, poised to replace the creatures of the daytime world and reign as Earth's new *conquistadors* [96] .

It was as if the end of the world had come to a part of the Amazon.

La Maravilla of Joaquín possessed the ability to create life, bringing forth creatures that *don't exist anywhere else in the world* . However, these beings were terrifyingly cruel and ferocious. The creatures of darkness were all blind, and perhaps because of this, they indiscriminately attacked friends and foes, humans and Astrals alike, voraciously preying upon them.

The temple, beginning to crumble, was filled with thunderous cries of agony and despair. Everywhere screams filled the air, and those present were consumed as if they were nourishment for the 'night', a sight so gruesome it could turn one's stomach. Some were caught and torn apart, some had their limbs ripped off from the root, while others, with twitching cheeks and eyes rolled back, drooled and soiled themselves as their bodily fluids and organs were devoured like a drink. It was chaos. Some bodyguards hurried to evacuate, while others had already fled. Sasha, while protecting herself, searched for Octavio and Joaquín, but they had disappeared into the darkness amidst the mayhem.

"There are an infinite number of them... if you unleash these things, even your own forces will be wiped out..."

The only option was to capture the user to stop them. However, when Sasha pushed away a giant crustacean-like creature that suddenly bumped into her with a thud, her hand developed a rash upon contact. The rash swelled into worm-like bulges, spreading to her arms and neck, resembling the marks of a branding iron or whip. Pain shot through the affected areas, rendering her fingertips immobile as if they were paralyzed. Sasha summoned her birds again, and was lifted into the air by a giant bird. The writhing mass of creatures below looked like sediment collected at the bottom of the night, a domain of nightmares that one would rather not see. It was terribly revolting. *Where is Lisa Lisa?* Hernández also needed to be found. Perhaps the only way to break out of this dire situation was to airlift everyone from the Foundation out using her bird.

The never-before-seen creatures attacked both humans and Astrals. That would mean they were Astrals themselves, but they were visible to even Hernández, and it was hard to imagine that such a large number and variety could be born from one person alone. This manifestation of *la Maravilla* was utterly inexplicable and unclassifiable, just like the creatures themselves. Suddenly, a loud flapping of wings was heard, and a winged, gelatinous creature descended upon Sasha's head. Some creatures had the ability to fly, startling the birds, who scattered in all directions. Sasha was stung by a tentacle and began to bleed. She was also able to feel it with her own fingers. These were real creatures after all, not Astrals.

The attacker was a bell-shaped creature resembling an umbrella. It had wings on the underside of the umbrella, with a mouth at the center. From the rim of the umbrella, tentacles about ten meters long extended, opening and closing their sucker-like ends. Sasha, hanging in mid-air, tried to shield her head with her arms, but they were too limp to exert any strength. Despite her efforts, it was as if she was ineffectively swatting at air, unable to make any real impact. The mouth of the tentacle that coiled around her clung to her skin like a suction cup, and its stinger sucked Sasha's blood. One by one, her birds fell. The toothed stinger growing from the mouth of the umbrella pierced her skin and burrowed into her skull. Her consciousness blurred. *Damn it, am I really going to become food for this coffee jelly monster...?*

"Sasha!"

Scattered birds brought Hernández up into the air. He held a torch in his hand, jumped onto the top of the umbrella-like creature, and swung the torch attempting to interrupt its feeding, but the creature didn't slow down its consumption of Sasha. It wasn't afraid of fire. "Bullets and blades are useless!" Hernández shouted desperately. "Even setting it on fire doesn't work. But as a living creature, it must have a weakness!"

Hernández's words sparked a moment of clarity in Sasha's head, which was rapidly blurring from her blood being sucked out.

Bloodsucking. Maybe—

Sasha emitted energy from the tips of her ten fingers touching the gelatinous umbrella. The giant umbrella vibrated wildly, loosening its grip on her. Sasha increased her firepower, blasting straight upwards. She fell from the recoil, and Hernández also fell from the top of the umbrella. Immediately caught by the 'birds', they flew together, held by their limbs. They looked down upon the swarm of eldritch creatures covering the ground, gliding through the gaps between the long legs of the gigantic crane fly that pierced the night sky. The Ripple Overdrive worked against these creatures.

"Ta-daaaaaaah! Look, it's the *fin del mundo* [97] !" yelled Alhorn, rolling on the ground with only his head. "Are you going to eat me or not?" Amidst the swarming night creatures, he reveled in ecstasy at his impending doom, as if he might even start humming a *folclore* *[98]* . "Go ahead, *disfruta la comida* ! [99] "

A terribly lonely and dreadful sound, like a group of the dead passing by on their way to the next world, could be heard. Was that the sound of those creatures crawling on the ground? Alhorn screamed in delight. Lisa Lisa knew the end was near, even without his exaggerated screams. *'El Aleph will kill you,' huh?*

Her view was littered with debris. The temple was half-destroyed, with debris piled up like *andenes* *[100]* due to eldritch creatures overflowing and breaking through walls and ceilings. Lisa Lisa carefully climbed from one piece of debris to another, checking her footing, but her foot slipped midway through and she fell down. Her entire body trembled, almost engulfed by the thick darkness of the 'night' that still surrounded the *selva* . Her weak consciousness almost gave in to the sensation that felt almost pleasurable, like sinking into the dark, lukewarm earth. Yet, she managed to get up slowly, climbing the debris stairs again. The rooftop of the temple, overlooking the *selva* and the commune, was half intact. The view was unclear, but she could see two figures. Had one run up here and the other followed? Or had they both reached this high point

together? Perhaps for these two, it didn't make much difference either way.

"You look like you're on your deathbed, no matter how you look at it," said Octavio, turning to speak. "Why go to such lengths? Just give up. Give up and back off."

"What are you two doing here?" Lisa Lisa asked.

"We need to decide what to do next," Octavio spoke in a way that made it seem like he was informing Joaquín as well, who was beside him.

“This guy unleashed the nocturnal *brutos* [101] in full force. They're multiplying, feeding, and will soon fill the Amazon from end to end. We’ll need to rebuild our organization, but meanwhile, should we leave the jungle as it is, march towards the city, and hold a siege? What do you think, Joaquín?”

For a moment, Joaquín's eyes seemed to shine. It was a subtle, odd expression, as if something was throbbing within him. Maybe he was remembering something, or reviving sealed emotions and passions he thought he had abandoned. Whatever was suddenly revealed, it seemed to regress him back to an innocent boy—Joaquín was crying.

"I'm the same as you guys..." Lisa Lisa said, deepening her breath and speaking with a raspy voice.

"The same? How are you the same?" retorted Octavio.

"I was also an *huérfano* *[102]* . I lost my real parents when I was a baby. There were nights when I couldn't bear the loneliness and cried my eyes out. But on the other hand, the darkness of the night also awakened various dreams. The night is not just for closing your

eyes. It can also be a window to free imagination."

Indeed, the 'night' brings revelations. It can be a realm of evil, beyond the reach of God's salvation. Needless to say, black magic and sorcery are said to exert their power at night, vampires are active at night, and werewolves transform on full moon nights. The power of *imaginación* is often nurtured by the absence of light. The *huérfanos* know this by experience.

"So you understand our feelings?" asked Octavio. "Your sentimental babble won't stop El Aleph."

"I'm not saying that. The reason I came here is..."

"Preaching or appealing to our emotions is useless. Don't you get it?"

"To have a match."

"A match?"

"Yes, with our Astrals. Let's settle this with ' *las Maravillas'* . '"

"Oh, oh, ahh," Joaquín exclaimed. *Have you also awakened to a strange power?*

"I acquired an 'Arrow' through certain means and used it, despite my age. So when I said I am the same as you, I meant not only in origin but also as a wielder of ' *la Maravilla* '. Of course, that's where the similarities end. I haven't led a fragile life torn apart and consumed by the darkness of the mind like you have."

"Fragile? Us... us?!"

"I will use this ability only once in my life, and only on you two."

The ground they were standing on was shaking. The dominating 'night' was trembling. Lisa Lisa, with her face buried in her scarf, focused her consciousness on the torrent of red light flowing deep within her. In the depths of her weakening heart and body, she pictured a *visión* , yearning deeply. At the bottom of the night, she manifested another image of herself.

"The House of Earth."

And there it stood, with its majestic form. A *visión* that Lisa Lisa could see . If one were to boldly refer to it as a ‘ *woman’* , *her* entire body was outlined with supple contours and curves, endowed with the brilliance and hardness of rubies. *Her* hair was red, and *her* face, adorned with an archaic smile, was also red. Patterns of the sun and moon were depicted on *her* breasts, and *her* abdomen was swollen, glowing bright red like the earth ablaze.

Unlike Lisa Lisa, *her* limbs were not weakened. *She* didn’t suffer from pain in *her* hips or knees, and could run at extraordinary speeds.

The House of Earth.

In an instant, *she* closed the distance and pounced on Octavio and Joaquín. *Her* dynamically-moving figure trailed a comet-like tail, enveloping *her* with rainbow-colored dust like sequins. *Her* fist swung down, shattering the platform where Joaquín and Octavio stood. A large chunk was carved out, scattering stone pebbles around. Much to Lisa Lisa's own surprise, *she* was a type of Astral that attacked with powerful arms at close-range. One might say *she* was a type faithful to the basics.

“I wonder,” Lisa Lisa addressed the two with her voice, as she fought without moving. “Isn’t it possible that *‘la Maravilla’* of one person is born to counter *‘la Maravilla’* of another?”

“This power… is this really the kind of *Fantasma* that a dying *viejos* *[103]* would have?”

“That’s the power of my soul. My spirit. But do you know what’s strange?”

Her red fists delivered a barrage of punches. Octavio couldn't dodge them all and fell.

"Only Joaquín should be able to see *her* . Y et you can see *her* too, Octavio, can’t you?"

Octavio was visibly shaken after hearing that. Joaquín shouted and lifted Octavio, deflecting the falling fists and dodging the attacks. It was clear that he was prioritizing Octavio's safety over his own.

It all makes sense to me now. The doubts that Lisa Lisa harbored were now shifting into firm conviction. Now, she could see various things more clearly. From her current standpoint, she began to discern the contours of hidden truths.

"Bow to the royal presence of El Aleph, for the king has descended! Ohohohohoho !!" Alhorn was screaming like a madman.

‘These guys are bizarre, we've been wrong about them from the beginning.’ Lisa Lisa had finally deciphered the answer to the true meaning of his words. As if Joaquín blew a dog whistle, the monstrous creatures of the ‘night’ crawled up the piled rubble, making their way to the rooftop where Lisa Lisa and others stood. The 'night' was endlessly birthing eldritch creatures, each one multiplying as if they were splitting apart, resulting in a teeming

torrent that surged upwards. They swarmed together, forming a dense mass that expanded, spilling over and beginning to lift the stone slabs of the rooftop from below. As the balance for those atop the rooftop shook, their viewpoint rapidly rose higher.

What suddenly appeared in the midst of the dark night was like a floating arena in the sky. The stage for a battle between life and death was set for Lisa Lisa and The House of Earth, as well as Octavio and Joaquín.

"You've had that ability for a while, haven't you, Octavio? In Guatemala and in Peru, you seemed to have a sense for the flow of battle. I don't know if you were fully aware of it, but you've always been able to see the movements of Astrals."

Lisa Lisa's Astral didn't let up on the offensive. It was Joaquín, whose whole body was covered in black marks, that stood up to her while protecting Octavio.

"As Alhorn said, a clash against you with ' *las Maravillas* ' clarifies things. That sense of presence, something between what's visible and what's not. What's unclear is… *Joaquín, are you aware of this, yourself?* "

Joaquín was battling an Astral, just like the monstrous creatures of the 'night' he had created. As he faced off against Lisa Lisa's Astral, his expression shifted in response to Lisa Lisa's words. From the moment the battle began, Joaquín had thrown himself into it with all his might. His face, and particularly his gaze, now revealed emotions that had been suppressed. Octavio roared as if to shake off his agitation. However, he himself could not join the fight against the Astral. He could see it, but couldn't grapple with it.

"Joaquín, do you have any memories of times when you weren't with Octavio?"

One by one, two more writhing creatures climbed onto the arena. They surged up, blindly sniffing out life, crawling around the airborne arena. Eldritch creatures with black wings also swarmed and jumped in. Three to four instinctively gathered without self-awareness. The arena rose even higher as the ground crumbled.

The House of Earth, Lisa Lisa's Astral, reacted to the intruding creatures. As *she* fought, Lisa Lisa wove her words. With fists and words, she began to unravel the tangled situation.

"Everything started with zero understanding of *'las Maravillas'*. For myself, the Foundation, and you guys... I guess that was the main cause of all this."

The years had filled that gap. Their past years weren't spent in vain. Hernández and Sasha visited ability users, collecting samples amidst great dangers and battles. The Speedwagon Foundation's research institute analyzed them in detail, drastically accumulating data and clearing away the darkness of ignorance and delusion. While much remains unexplained about the mystery of the emergence of *'las Maravillas'* , they collected examples of abilities appearing without being pierced by the 'Arrow'. There were cases where abilities emerged following transplantation of an ability user's blood or cells, cases of natural-born ability users, or even cases where a relative's awakening would cause a secondhand awakening.

"No ability is the same as another. Close-range types, remote control types, automatic tracking types... the database of the Foundation is being updated with new categories so rapidly that it's impossible to keep up. The *visións* have forms that can vary from being humanoid, animal, or mechanical, each with its own distinct voice. Some make mechanical noises, some chirp, and there was even a case of a cargo ship visible to the naked eye appearing," she explained.

"Shut up, Señora, I don't want to hear your gobbledygook anymore.

No vamos a morir [104] . " Octavio retorted as he attacked Lisa Lisa directly.

With his prosthetic left leg, he unleashed a wide, swinging kick. Suddenly, a flock of birds swooped down and attacked Octavio. They pecked and flapped at the disrespectful man as if punishing him for his lack of respect for the elderly.

"Lisa Lisa!" a voice called out. Sasha and Hernández, hanging from several birds, flew into the arena. Sasha shouted at the top of her lungs, "The Ripple works on these creatures!"

If that's the case, that's even more convenient for me. Responding to Lisa Lisa's call, The House of Earth greatly arched *her* chest and drew in air, puckering *her* ruby-colored cheeks. Having drawn the breath deep into *her* lungs, *she* held it, then puffed out *her* cheeks and forcefully exhaled.

It was a ferocious wind. A storm so strong that its speed seemed to reach 35 meters per second. A wind strong enough to tilt trees and make it impossible for people to stand. At first observation of this power, Lisa Lisa thought she had been granted an ability related to 'wind'—the power to blow away evil with breaths that turn into whirlwinds, gusts, and hurricanes. But it was more than that. She noticed Octavio clinging to a slab of stone despite the fierce wind, his face growing hot and visibly scorched.

Lisa Lisa fully understood the power of The House of Earth. As *she* puffed out her cheeks and blew with a ' whooooooosh ,' the fierce wind *she* unleashed carried intense heat and countless airborne particles. These fine particles, consisting of cinnabar, lead, titanium, mercury, and other elements that were originally drawn up from the earth, were all superconductors. The molecules making up the gas ionized, splitting into cations and electrons, possessing qualities extremely similar to 'solar wind.' If this strong wind were to blow through a city, it would cause intense geomagnetic fluctuations with its high-density plasma, breaking electrical devices, and destroying

power plants and substations. It would lead to a widespread power outage.

In other words, the fierce wind of The House of Earth, laden with superconducting particles, can be infused with the energy of the Ripple. It can direct the Ripple Overdrive at targets without the need for water, oil, or biological mediums as intermediaries. It was like a never-ending dream for a Ripple user. Imagine if Lisa Lisa's specially knitted scarf was unraveled strand by strand, and the strands were blown with each gust of wind. The oldest known user of *'la Maravilla'* was endowed with an extraordinary power, a crystallization of a life marked by intense battles. The wind *she* conjured, a strong gust shimmering with fine sparkles, blew away the creatures of the 'night' while burning them, annihilating them as if they were being purified.

If ' *la Maravilla* ' of Joaquín was the power of the **night** , and Sasha's was the ability to command **birds** , then Lisa Lisa's was undoubtedly the power of the **Ripple** .

The curtain of night was being torn away, through the unparalleled secret techniques of a Ripple user. Although the Ripple didn't affect Astrals, it worked on real people and creatures. In fact, the creatures birthed by El Aleph were burned by the golden wind. Of course, Lisa Lisa had to exert all her strength. While she produced the strong wind, she had to infuse the Ripple energy herself. A strong body alone doesn't generate powerful Ripple energy. It's the breath and the vitality deeply tied to the spiritual realm of the soul that determine the quality and quantity of the Ripple Overdrive. Lisa Lisa, once hailed as an extraordinary Ripple user, knew this well. The Ripple does not depend on age or physical strength. It's the temperature of the blood coursing through the body and the shine of the soul that matter. Even if this was to be her last battle—her blood was boiling. Her arteries throbbed and veins wailed, about to reach the boiling point. Her blood surged at 100 degrees Celsius, threatening to rupture her lungs, heart, liver, and kidneys.

Lisa Lisa once knew extraordinary Ripple warriors. The energy of

the Ripple was infused into American clackers and soap bubbles stained with fresh blood—her scarf, used as a medium, was likened to the celestial robe of nymphs in the East. All of the energy that had been released by Ripple users up to now danced gracefully in the wind of The House of Earth, swirling and evoking images of the warriors' faces appearing and disappearing in a flash of golden light, like memories in a revolving lantern of life.

Perhaps this is the last grand stage of the Ripple technique that we've inherited.

As the eldritch creatures were being exterminated, Octavio shouted against the storm. His eyes wide with rage, his face fierce and unmatched in ferocity, and the voice of his beast-like roar a mix of lamentation and sobbing.

"I've been thinking—" Lisa Lisa spoke continuously, as if pouring even her unspoken hopes into the golden wind. "Octavio, *weren't you already awakened to 'la Maravilla' even before you were shot by the 'Arrow'* , before we even met?"

This was the crux of Lisa Lisa's theory, the mistaken premise Alhorn had made, and the giant misconception swirling in this 'night.' Their lives underwent a significant transformation before and after being shot by the 'Arrow' in San Juan de Lurigancho, but that could be the reason why Octavio didn't awaken to a new ability when he was shot by the 'Arrow' that day.

"For some reason, you don't seem to be aware of it," Lisa Lisa pressed on. "You are Octavio's other half, the *visión* created by Octavio!" Her tone was deliberate enough to be heard even amidst the storm, as she trembled in her forehead, cheeks, and mouth. With an intensified gaze, her exclamation was as if to shatter the very phenomenon before her. "A *visión* that is infinitely *perfecto* and *puro* , but not *transparente* , visible even to ordinary eyes. An Astral that didn't realize it was an Astral itself. That's you."

Huh?

Joaquín, with tears in his eyes, was astonished. It seemed he had not been aware of it. At least on Joaquín's part— He was clearly confused. Naturally, his independent self had been denied. The feelings of Joaquín's bewilderment, as if his knees were falling apart, and the trembling of his body as if the ground was crumbling beneath his feet, seemed to flow into Lisa Lisa's body through the golden wind.

What are you talking about? Me, an Astral? But, I'm… I'm definitely visible to everyone's eyes. What about the classification of visible and invisible things?

Lisa Lisa stopped the blast from The House of Earth. In the brief calm, Joaquín shook his head in disbelief. When questioned, he even searched his memories and couldn't seem to find any scenes of himself completely alone, without Octavio. From their first encounter in the *orfanato* , the time he lived in the alleys after dropping out of seminary, and even after joining the Foundation's investigation team, *Joaquín was always by Octavio's side.*

Joaquín was perplexed . *Was I born for that purpose?*

A moment stretched into eternity. Lisa Lisa gazed at Joaquín. In that moment, as if time had stopped, scenes from the past came rushing in—

Right beside the *orfanato* , at the *Cerro de la Cruz* *[105]* . That was the place where Joaquín first met Octavio. He's there now, returning to his earliest memory in life. Joaquín couldn't bear to see Octavio playing *fútbol* *[106]* alone and offered to be his goalkeeper. Wasn't that what happened?

There's no replacement for a lost family. But if you're always

alone, you can't practice *fútbol* or *lucha* [107] . If you stay locked up in your room playing alone, you'll be caught by a fear as ferocious as a growling bear and torn to pieces. You'll drown in the sorrow that seeps through the cracks. The sister at the *orfanato* , well aware of such mental states, often said sourly, "You must make friends." So that night, Octavio followed her advice.

Looking around, there was no one. Only darkness. When engulfed by darkness, one becomes blind. Being blinded leads to fear, but true darkness doesn't blind you. Instead, it becomes an extension of your eyes and your senses. A window into unseen landscapes. Instinctively knowing this, Octavio acted on the advice without even understanding the ability already residing within him. Because right at that moment, he needed someone to play with him as a goalkeeper. He was so tired of living alone, to the point of death.

So, he created Joaquín.

If he could just have one friend, then that person should be someone of the same age, preferably a mestizo over an indio. Someone smart, who could return the ball back more accurately than a wall. And someone just as lonely, to share his fears and sorrows.

Thus, Joaquín, who appeared before Octavio, was mostly what Octavio wished for, though couldn't speak for some reason. He was good at anything, from *fútbol* to *lucha* , but never outshone Octavio. In fights or sports, Joaquín never surpassed Octavio in areas where Octavio wanted to do better than anyone else. He wasn't popular with girls, either. However, when it came to studying, he was quick to learn. He showed talent in math, languages, and theology - areas where Octavio didn't mind not being *numero uno* [108] .

Octavio believed the world held surprises and adventures for

him, with the honor of becoming an *héroe* [109] waiting at the end of the journey. As long as Octavio believed so, Joaquín had to become a *bardo* , singing of his exploits. In essence, Joaquín was the *numero dos* [110] , a radio whispering the voices of his heart, a mirror image, a *compañero* [111] in flirtations, someone considerate enough to wait outside when he sneaked into a *muchacha* 's room, a companion for sleepless nights, a buddy to revel naked with in wild parties. A sworn *hermano* [112] who follows behind like a younger brother, or sometimes acts as an elder brother leading the way. After joining the Foundation, he was a knowledgeable friend who could memorize the principles. A comrade-in-arms who could assist Octavio with *telepatía* [113] at crucial moments. Above all, he was Octavio's *amigo cercano* [114] , understanding him more than anyone else.

I think,* Joaquín thought. *That's why I have no memory without Octavio. I followed wherever Octavio decided to go, even when he decided to leave our hometown. Isn't it strange that we supposedly grew up in the same orfanato but first only met outside at night? That's where I was born. Perhaps, 'la Maravilla' that was budding inside Octavio without him realizing it was activated, and I, who shouldn't have had a physical form, appeared with one. Like an amigo invisible* [115] *of children appearing in dreams. I filled in Octavio's shortcomings, and for a while, became his crutch after he lost his leg. Octavio comforted me in my heartaches and anguish, following me wherever I went on my wanderings. Heartache, anguish? How could those be mine alone? No, weren't they originally not just mine? If I trace the cause, it's because I awoke to the 'night' power, but was that really my ability? Was I just a compañero (Astral) that acted as the medium, and El Aleph was actually Octavio's ability?

Ah, was it me?

Am I El Aleph?

Have you finally realized it?

The depths of the night were shaking, the ground vibrating intensely. The aerial arena swayed and continued to rise higher amidst the tremors. Piles of eldritch creatures formed mountains, erupting like ranges. Even though they were swept away by the Ripple-infused wind of The House of Earth and tumbled down in a trembling heap, they endlessly multiplied and crawled back into the arena. It felt like being on a small boat thrown into a stormy sea. Lisa Lisa felt seasick, unable to control her dizziness.

“You understand now, don't you...?”

Gradually, the whole situation was becoming clearer. To Lisa Lisa, to Sasha and Hernández, and to Joaquín himself. Whether Octavio's power was innate or awakened at some point in his childhood remained unknown. But at a certain moment in the past, when his power unintentionally activated, a friend with flesh and blood stood beside him—a partner destined to share his fate forever. An embodiment of Octavio's conscience.

"Even if you didn't realize it as a boy or young man," said Lisa Lisa. "You must have somewhat figured it out at some point, right?"

Octavio, still crouching, didn’t answer. In his upward glare, there was still a fire of indignation and ambition in his eyes.

"Your ability is probably something like this," Lisa Lisa explained to Octavio and Joaquín. "Creating a *friend* with a completely independent ego, flesh, blood, and spirit—"

It was perhaps something that could only be activated once in a lifetime.

A friend.

A friend who is an Astral, yet not just an Astral anymore. No other special abilities. To stand by his side. To live together. That was all. Perhaps the sudden onset of Octavio's power activating in his childhood was due to being an orphan, which led Joaquín to come into existence. Although he is independent, he doesn't stray far from his user's desires, like ' *las Maravillas* ' of others. Bound by fate, he would protect the user, and if the user were to fall into evil, he would fall too.

"We don't understand why Joaquín, being an Astral, awakened the power of 'night' when pierced by that 'Arrow'... Perhaps shooting an Astral with the 'Arrow' triggers a new power awakening or an uncontrollable rampage. *'Las Maravillas'* can grow and evolve, or deteriorate and even explode based on the mental state of each individual. The Foundation has reported such data."

AHHHHHH, AH, AHHH, AHHHHHHHH!

Joaquín collapsed to his knees.

Why didn't I realize it? Am I a cabrón [116] ?

Perhaps Joaquín didn't realize the truth of his origins until this moment because of his strong independence, the unusual bond between the two, or maybe because Octavio strongly wished for him not to. Respecting Joaquín, who has been by his side for as long as he could remember, Octavio protected and avoided hurting him.

The revealed truth struck Joaquín more sharply than Alhorn's 'Arrow'. Kneeling motionless, his bloodshot eyes drifted from his own hands and feet to Octavio, and to Lisa Lisa.

Why didn't I realize? Why didn't you tell me? Why are you telling me now? Why?

The black marks covering Joaquín spread all over his skin, engulfing his entire body, reaching even the whites of his eyes. Black tears overflowed, streaming down his cheeks. His body began to tremble as if possessed by illness. His head thrown back, he swayed unsteadily. The look he gave his companion, as if seeking salvation, harbored emotions never held before.

Octavio, I hate you a little. I've dirtied my hands following you. There's truly nowhere to return to, is there?

Joaquin's gaze, in an instant, seemed to encompass infinity, even hinting at eternity. It was as if he was staring from a place much darker than the 'night,' where not even the horizon could be seen.

"...Don't look at me with those eyes!" Octavio countered with an intense gaze. "...Just realizing it doesn't change anything. *Los dos estamos solos* *[117]* , right?"

"No, you and Joaquín are different!" Lisa Lisa shouted at the top of her lungs.

"All you have to do is live. With me."

"I told you this… because you can become a beacon of hope," Lisa Lisa said to the trembling Joaquín. "The divergence and opposition you showed are hope. In spite of Octavio's unyielding will to live and his ambition to own this world, you've struck back. Even though you were created by Octavio, the spirit that grew within you can be the guiding light for the Foundation, and the world that our descendants will face!"

You were crying. Were those tears squeezed out by deeply ingrained morals, unable to bear the excessively cruel acts that embodied the idea of a savior? Or were you lamenting your own descent into such brutality? Each of us has intense personal feelings

that encompass our lives. You and Octavio both. I don't believe that even those feelings of yours were lost to evil.

Octavio screamed. For him, this 'night' wasn't his final destination. There was always something beyond. Therefore, he wouldn't back down or retreat. Being born into this world, being consumed by the dream of becoming a *héroe* , getting revenge against Alhorn, living only within 'night' with Joaquín, and becoming the ruler of the commune in the *selva* . Was all of that just for it to end here? Such a notion was unacceptable. So Octavio kept roaring, rejecting what Lisa Lisa conveyed, resisting as long as he could.

Perhaps humans don't really have freedom. Maybe South America and the world itself misinterprets its own freedom as it indulges in unrestrained tyranny. Humans tossed into this world like pebbles, destined to be buffeted around, can only dream of freedom tomorrow while dancing wildly. But even so, Lisa Lisa harbors hope.

Even at this age, I cannot give up on the world. I cannot turn away from the endeavors of people. I know what I want—In the twilight between light and darkness, where hope and despair come face to face, in this fleeting world that we all must eventually leave—what I want is to watch the frozen-in-time smiles of my loved ones. Octavio and Joaquín will be there too. I can feel their heartbeats, their breaths. Octavio, who tried to live as the strongest, and Joaquín, who was the most 'human' of all. I can sense their eternal bond. Of course, it's just a fleeting fantasy of an old woman. A scene that doesn't exist, and cannot exist. Yet for the sake of the golden spirit born from this place, for the sake of living naturally as humans, we stand firm in this trembling, uncertain world.

As if stirred by a strong wind, the ground shook, and a vast, endless curtain of darkness descended upon them. This 'night,' darker than the cosmos itself, enveloped them in an endless abyss. The long legs of the towering crane fly, now larger than the height of the arena, pierced through the edge, and Lisa Lisa was about to be cast off a cliff, along with Octavio who was attacking her.

What happened next occurred in the blink of an eye. Joaquín instantly reached out and grabbed Lisa Lisa's arm. It was his own physical body, not controlled by Octavio's mind, that saved her in the nick of time. His downward gaze at her, with his two eyes as vast as the night sky he once loved, spoke more eloquently of his intentions than ever before. Barely hanging on by himself, Octavio managed to crawl back onto the ground where he regained his balance. He then swung his prosthetic leg as a deadly weapon in an attempt to kick Lisa Lisa back down, who had just been pulled up by Joaquín. Joaquín pushed Octavio away, defying his user's desires not once, but twice.

"You, why are you doing this to me—"

Lo siento [118] . But I have no choice but to do this.

However , their strong bond remained unsevered. The House of Earth ceased *her* golden breath and turned around, launching an unparalleled flurry of punches at the evil *el Jefe* —Octavio. Joaquín threw himself into the fray once again, shielding his user, enduring the *sancion final [119]* as if committed to living out their intertwined destinies to the very end.

"YAWAYAWAYAWAYAWAYAWAYAWAYAWAYAWAYAWAYAWAYAWAY

Octavio and Joaquín were blasted away, clutching each other as they fell into the abyss below the cliff, into the sea of voracious eldritch creatures. Would these beings, infinite in number, devour their creators? Judging from how the two were being evasive on the rooftop, it might be dangerous. However, if both of them become incapacitated, it could break the spell of the 'night's' darkness, possibly causing the massive creatures to dissolve away as well. Now the apex predator of the *selva* 's food chain, The House of

Earth wiped out the remaining creatures with *her* Ripple-infused wind, including the horrendous long-legged monster. The Ripple being channeled was from Lisa Lisa herself. Even with Sasha's assistance, Lisa Lisa had already reached her physical and mental limits.

"Please, just save those two. Please rescue them," she implored.

Hernández and the birds began searching for the two who had fallen into the midst of the eldritch creatures. Lisa Lisa, now on the ground and overwhelmed, awaited news of their rescue within her fading consciousness.

Curved beams of light, like fangs, shot vigorously towards the night sky. The luminous arrows, dazzling in silver and vermilion, ascended with incredible speed, shrinking to mere specks like shooting stars. Suddenly, a vast curtain of colors draped down from the sky above, overflowing with shades of red, green, and purple that shifted in gradation. It was an aurora. A natural light phenomenon typically seen in polar regions. Although the mechanism behind its appearance is still partly unknown, it is believed to be caused by solar winds from space affecting the atmosphere and Earth's magnetofield, never observed in tropical regions.

Perhaps the whirlwind of Ripple unleashed by The House of Earth on its single night of battle had summoned this spectacle. It appeared as a sign of reconciliation from the 'night' to the world; an expression of a grand will that was far removed from the affairs of those on the ground. For Lisa Lisa, gazing upward at this spectacle was a first, and she was profoundly moved to find something that could still leave such a strong impression on her even at her age. The majestic landscape draped over the *selva* 's ridgelines was breathtakingly beautiful and solemn, captivating her so much that she watched for a while with her jaw agape. It was as if the Earth was flaunting its finest garment from a wardrobe, a splendid dress fluttering in the breeze. Perhaps it was the final curtain being lowered to signal the end of the battle in the tropical rainforest.

The night sky shone with an indefinable multitude of colors, undulating and rippling before gradually fading away. Soon, the sky beyond began to lighten from ink to indigo, heralding the approach of dawn with its warm hues.

"Morning is coming," said Lisa Lisa.

Epilogo

Now then, to the people of future generations: The trail of the woman hailed among the final generation of Ripple users vanishes from the Foundation's records at this juncture. According to what was recorded, upon her return from the Amazon, she was discovered to be afflicted with a disease. She wandered the border between life and death for three days and nights, consumed by the fire of malaria and gazed up at the looming specter of death.

Ah, it’s finally time…

Just when it seemed her end was near and the emergency news spread, her relatives and associates gathered around her. However, she managed to cling to life and subsequently settled down in a care facility on a small hill.

According to nurses and caretakers, she enjoyed both the deep, uninterrupted sleep filled with warmth and the awakenings that felt like blessings. Though sometimes tormented in severe nightmares, she woke without lingering fear or discomfort. Since falling ill, her decline due to old age accelerated. Her weight dropped, and her once crystal-clear consciousness – reminiscent of a beautiful library

– began to show signs of fraying and decay like moth-eaten spots. Night after night, she would sit contentedly in a rocking chair on the porch, endlessly gazing at distant mountains, forests by the lake, and the nearby vineyards. She seemed to have chosen this facility, where she had few acquaintances, as her final abode, showing no inclination to move elsewhere. She didn't venture out for shopping, and visitors were scarce. However, a few months after moving into the hilltop facility, her family visited for the first time in a long while and stayed for some time. Since the malaria incident, it was on this occasion that she briefly regained some vitality. She not only reminisced about memories from her younger days, but also spoke at length about her extensive investigations throughout Central and South America, as her family wished to hear.

As far as records show, the Selva Cartel's commune was once again apprehended by the *Guardia Civil* under the newly returned sunlight. The massive coca production sites were shut down, leading to the scattered fates of the gathered residents, farmers, and bodyguards. But what became of the man who sat as *el Jefe* and his companion? Regrettably, their fates are not documented in the Foundation's records, at least not in the official ones. Just like the "Arrow," retrieved by Sasha Logins and J.D. Hernández and placed in a storage area known only to a few, the whereabouts of the duo might be secretly kept in someone's heart. However, even these concealed truths will, over time and with the passing of those involved, fade away like dust in the wind, drifting into an unremembered past. All that remains is to await the day when the unwritten *páginas en blanco* [120] of history will finally tell their story.

According to Suzi Q, who had been close with Lisa Lisa even before becoming her daughter-in-law, she felt something chilling about Lisa Lisa during her visit to the facility. She mentioned that Lisa Lisa talked to herself more and had become skinnier like when a chicken gets its feathers plucked. Her cheekbones were prominent, and her once luscious white hair was now tangled and unkempt.

"I can’t believe that Madam stopped going to the beauty salon. She looks so burnt-out… is that how fierce the battles in South America

were?"

However, her husband reassured her that there was no need to worry so much. "Even if she's drained of all her Ripple energy, she still has plenty of life left in her."

On the morning of their departure, the mother and son spent a long time talking alone. The son, wearing a fedora, had his face covered with a white beard. Wrinkles crisscrossed his cheeks and the corners of his eyes, showing his age, but he still retained the tall, handsome features reported in the Foundation's records. Above all, he was still brimming with vitality even in his old age. Suzi Q's combed silver hair was tied back with a raspberry-colored ribbon. She sat next to her elderly mother-in-law, who was comfortably seated in a rocking chair on the porch, silently savoring the deep blue sky and the brisk air. They sat in silence for a while, enjoying the moment. The son understood, even without speaking, how deeply his aged mother cherished this quiet time and the morning that she was able to welcome once again.

"Such an incredible story..." the son said deeply, exhaling. "The Orphans of the Storm, El Aleph... What happened to them after the infinite 'night' ended?"

"They visited me several times, even at my place," she replied.

It's unclear whether she meant formal visits or encounters in dreams. Despite the ambiguity, Joseph Joestar didn't fret.

"This might be the first time in the world where there are simultaneous awakenings of such powers right now."

At this time, Joseph Joestar already had manifested that particular power. He had the ability to create thorny vines from his arms and wrists and to produce spirit photography. This allowed him to

uncover the fact that the vile ghost of the past from the bottom of the sea had revived—a being with the most fateful connection with the Joestar family. The star-shaped birthmark and the writhing presence in a foreign land — the mother and son talked about everything.

After saying all she could, the elderly mother said, "It seems there's nothing I can do. Even when we think the unparalleled evil has been destroyed, it regenerates with the course of the world. An unknown, terrifying power overflows endlessly, and people from the past have no means to support a world crumbling like a mound of sand. There's nothing left for me to do."

"But what should we call this power? The Foundation's terms like 'Astral' or ' *la Maravilla* ' don't quite resonate with me," Joseph asks his elderly mother, who was deep in thought.

"What would you call it? An evil spirit? A monster...?" she asked.

Indeed, there was no consensus on the terminology. Some preferred using terms like ‘God’ or ‘King.’

After contemplating for a moment, her gaze drifting to the distant scenery, she slowly opened her lips.

"‘Friends,’ perhaps?"

"Friends." Joseph repeated, taking a moment to digest the word, then laughed. He understood the sentiment, but thought calling them 'friends' was perhaps too mellow a term.

Soon, it was time to leave. Joseph stood up and hugged his mother tightly with his strong arms. He leaned his forehead on her shoulder, trembling as he reluctantly said goodbye. She whispered, "It’s okay, it’s okay," while wrapping her arms around his back, gently rocking him for a while. She would never hold back those about to embark on a journey. After sending his wife back home, Joseph was

planning to travel to the Far East. To Japan—

The sun was setting behind the lush green forest. Below, the lake rippled, and birds flew. Something large moved quietly through the forest, shaking the trees. Shortly after, something slightly smaller moved stealthily, rhythmically through the forest, eventually coming to a rest. In the distance, a rural town with high clock towers and tiled roofs was visible. Faint murmurs could be heard from its alleys.

"The journey is over, the world we know has vanished," she often muttered to herself. The new world that awaited was harsh yet fertile, where life and death intertwined. That world belonged to Joseph and his children and grandchildren, her descendants inheriting the golden spirit.

Descending the hill to the airport, Joseph's beloved Japanese-made Walkman was inserted with a cassette of Ben E. King, which he had recently been fond of listening to. Inspired by his mother's words, Joseph would eventually name this power ‘Stand.’ And with his own eyes, he would witness these extraordinary entities standing beside other ability users. But Lisa Lisa had no way of knowing what such a future would hold. As she rocked in her chair, a gentle sleepiness enveloped her, and Lisa Lisa softly closed her eyes.

La Extraña Aventura de JOJO
rey infinito
El fin

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[1] *selva* - jungle
[2] *Guardia Civil* - Peruvian National Police
[3] *Vamos, vamos, no pares! - Advance, advance, don’t stop!*
[4] *Esta bien vamos - Let's go!*
[5] *familia* - family
[6] *padre y madre* - father and mother
[7] *cabanas* - stilt houses
[8] *combustión espontánea* - spontaneous combustion
[9] *maestro* - conductors
[10] *diablos* - demons
[11] *carajo no más - enough of this hell*
[12] *gringo* - white man
[13] *El Jefe* - The Boss
[14] *las Maravillas* - the Wondrous (Power)
[15] *rueda* - wheel

[16] *teporocho* - vagrant
[17] *intelligencia* - intelligence officer
[18] *visión* - vision
[19] *Monstruo* - Monster
[20] *Fantasma* - Evil Spirit
[21] *El Obsceno Pájaro de la Noche* - The Obscene Birds of the Night
[22] *El Pájaro* - The Bird
[23] *Rebaño* - Flock
[24] *el dorado* - paradise
[25] *Biblia* - Bible
[26] *No apia luz!* - There was no light!
[27] *sierra* - highland
[28] *Abuela* - Grandma
[29] *viaje sentimental* - sentimental journey
[30] *altiplano* - highland plateau
[31] *Japon* - Japan
[32] *Japones* - Japanese
[33] *Guardia Civil* - National Police
[34] *polleros* - smugglers
[35] *sicario* - hitman
[36] *ejército secreto* - private military organization
[37] *orfanato* - orphanage
[38] *Buenos noches* - Good evening
[39] *figurín de mierda* - pieces of shit
[40] *Biblia* - Bible
[41] *Yawar Fiesta* - Blood Festival
[42] El Aleph - Infinity King
[43] *espejismos - mirages*
[44] *trabajo de campo* - field research
[45] *invierno nuclear* - nuclear winter
[46] *los pulmones de la tierra* - the lungs of the earth
[47] *predicadors* - missionaries
[48] *turistas* - tourists
[49] *muchacha* - girl
[50] *infierno* - hell
[51] *serpiente* - serpent
[52] *espejismos* - mirages
[53] *Carajo* - Fuck
[54] *héroe* - hero
[55] *frio* - cold (a miss)
[56] *te quemas* - hot (a hit)
[57] *Vamos juntos* - Let's go together
[58] *Si, vamos* - Yeah, let's go
[59] *juego* - game/gamble
[60] *huérfanos - orphans*
[61] *policia* - police
[62] *infierno* - hell
[63] *Huérfanos de la Tormenta* - Orphans of the Storm

[64] *tsantsa* - shrunken head
[65] *alma gritando* - screaming soul
[66] *hijo de puta* - son of a bitch
[67] *abuelo* - grandfather
[68] *espíritu grande - imposing spirit*
[69] *villano* - villain
[70] *parca* - the Grim Reaper
[71] *asesino* - assassin
[72] *eclipse solar total* - total solar eclipse
[73] El Corazón de las Tinieblas - Heart of Darkness
[74] *bocinas* - horns
[75] *bail arinas de ballet* - ballet dancers
[76] *forma interesante* - fascinating shape
[77] *reglas* - rules
[78] *juego* - game (gamble)
[79] *el Creador* - the Creator
[80] *ebrio* - inebriate (drunkard)
[81] *corazón - heart*
[82] *ultimo golpe* - final blow
[83] *no-muertos* - undead
[84] *Mierda* - Shit
[85] *Por favor, perdóname - Please forgive me*
[86] *cabrón - asshole*
[87] *silla heredera* - heiress' chair (throne?)
[88] *perfecto* - perfect
[89] *transparente* - transparent
[90] *puro* - pure
[91] *imaginaci ó n* - imagination
[92] *creatividad* - creativity
[93] república bananera - banana republic
[94] *Dios Mio Maravilloso! Maravilloso ! Maravilloso !* - My god, how marvelous! Marvelous! Marvelous!
[95] *infierno* - hell
[96] *conquistadors* - conquerors
[97] *fin del mundo* - end of the world
[98] *folclore - folk song*
[99] *disfruta la comida!* - enjoy the meal!
[100] *andenes* - terraced fields
[101] *brutos* - brutes
[102] *huérfano - orphan*
[103] *viejos* - old person
[104] *No vamos a morir* - We're not going to die here.
[105] *Cerro de la Cruz* - Hill of the Cross
[106] *fútbol - soccer*
[107] *lucha* - wrestle
[108] *numero uno* - number one
[109] *héroe - hero*
[110] *numero dos* - number two / second-in-command

[111] *compañero* - companion / wingman
[112] *hermano* - brother
[113] *telepatía* - telepathy
[114] *amigo cercano* - close friend
[115] *amigo invisible* - imaginary/invisible friend
[116] *cabron* - idiot
[117] *Los dos estamos solos* - The two of us are one
[118] *Lo siento* - I'm sorry
[119] *sancion final* - final sanction
[120] *páginas en blanco* - blank pages